

**THE POSSIBLE INFLUENCE OF CRUCIAL PAULINE TEXTS ON THE ROLE  
OF WOMEN IN THE NKHOMA SYNOD OF THE CENTRAL AFRICAN  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

**by**

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## ABSTRACT

In the Central African Presbyterian Church (C.C.A.P.) women are marginalised in its synods. The Nkhoma Synod has taken the strictest measures in marginalising women in the sense that, unlike the other synods, at the time of writing this dissertation, they did not allow women to be deacons, elders or ministers. The dissertation is a quest to find out the root cause of this marginalisation. The main focus has been on finding out to what extent the Pauline writings influenced this marginalisation.

Chapter 1 describes the extent of women marginalisation in the C.C.A.P. Synods in Malawi, focusing especially on the Nkhoma Synod. Chapter 2 deals with the unparalleled contribution of women to the success of the Nkhoma Synod's work. The position of women in Malawi and within the Chewa society is discussed in chapter 3. Chapter 4 deals with various interpretations of 1 Corinthians 11:2–16; 14:34, 35. These are Pauline texts which seem to support the marginalisation of women. Chapter 5 presents the results of the research, while in chapter 6 suggestions are made with regard to the future improvement of the position of women.

### **Key Terms:**

Nkhoma Synod; Women; Marginalisation; Pauline writings influence; *Makewana*; Head covering; *Kephale*; Veiling; Cultural prejudice; *Chigwirizano cha Amai*; Ideology of the body; History of the Chewas; Spirit wives


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I declare that **THE POSSIBLE INFLUENCE OF CRUCIAL PAULINE TEXTS ON THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE NKHOMA SYNOD OF THE CENTRAL AFRICAN PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH** is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.



SIGNATURE

(Mr. H.C.T. Gondwe)



DATE

## **DEDICATION**

Dedicated with love and blessing to my beloved wife, Emily, and our children, Fyness, Fumuyane and Francis.

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The final result as well as any errors and misjudgements are mine and mine alone.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Orientation to the study

#### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

The Nkhoma Synod of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (C.C.A.P.) is one of the five synods of this church in Central Africa, namely the Nkhoma Synod in the Central Region of Malawi, the Livingstonia Synod in the Northern Region of Malawi, the Blantyre Synod in the Southern Region of Malawi, the Zambia Synod in Zambia, and the Harare Synod in Zimbabwe. These five synods are under one General Synod (Council of Reformed Churches in Central Africa [CRCCA] 2004:271-273). Andrew Murray established the first station of the Nkhoma Synod of the C.C.A.P. on 28 November 1889 near Chiwere Village about 26 miles west of the present Salima district headquarters. The station was called '*Mvera*', which means 'obedience' (Pretorius 1975:367). Murray was sent to Nyasaland (the present Malawi) by the Minister's Mission Union of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) of South Africa in 1888 (Phiri 2000:49). Nkhoma Station, the present Nkhoma Synod Headquarters, was established in 1896 at the request of Mazengera, a Chewa chief, in a bid to gain protection against the Ngoni raids (Pretorius 1975:368).

The C.C.A.P. in Malawi is characterised by patriarchy. Women are not allowed to occupy important positions like deacons, elders and ministers in the Nkhoma Synod. Although variations of patriarchy are practised in the three C.C.A.P. synods in Malawi, all of them are oppressive to women (Phiri 2000:136-137). The early missionary schools in the Livingstonia Synod were attended mainly by boys, since girls normally helped their mothers with domestic duties (Manda 2001:240). The synod did nothing to correct the imbalance. The ordination of women to diaconate and eldership offices in the Livingstonia Synod was necessitated by a vacuum created when men joined the army in the First and Second World Wars and some went outside the country to seek employment (Manda 2001:242). Exactly when women were allowed in leadership positions as deacons and elders is not recorded. Manda (2001:244) points out that "the involvement

of women in decision making committees began as early as World War 1”, while Phiri (1992:96) indicates that by 1951 Livingstonia Synod already had 270 women elders and 316 women deacons. According to Mlenga (2008:3), however, women have been deacons and elders since the birth of the C.C.A.P. in the Northern Region. The Presbyterian Church in the north (the present Livingstonia Synod) was established in the late 1800s. Mbelwa, a prominent Ngoni chief, gave the missionaries permission to evangelise and open schools in his territory in June 1886. If 1886 or Paas’s (2006:197) suggestion of 1899 is assumed to be correct, however, then Mlenga’s (2008:3) statement about women being elders in the Livingstonia Synod “since the birth of the C.C.A.P. in the northern region” does not support the evidence below.

The first group of seven deacons in the Blantyre Synod were all men (Ross 2000:151-152). Later some became elders (Ross 2000:173). Some of the White missionaries and their home church strongly opposed the acceptance of native (African) men as elders (Ross 2000:178). Blantyre Mission and Livingstonia Mission were both established and run by Scottish people. Given the opposition Blantyre Mission faced from the home church to the inclusion of native men as elders – especially since in their missionary group women accompanied them only as wives – Livingstonia Synod would not have found the inclusion of women easy.

Ross (2000:172), moreover, refers to an African elders’ conference from the Nyasaland Protectorate<sup>1</sup> in 1901. All the elders from Blantyre Presbytery and Livingstonia Presbytery<sup>2</sup> listed at the conference were men (Ross 2000:172).

Mlenga (2008:3) states that the Livingstonia Synod was the first to have women in eldership positions. According to the minutes of the General Synod of 10-13 September 1964, a Blantyre Synod representative to the General Synod noted that Livingstonia already had women elders. It is unlikely that if women had been elders since the birth of

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<sup>1</sup> What Malawi was formerly called.

<sup>2</sup> Blantyre and Livingstonia Synods were called presbyteries in the early stages (Ross 2000:175).

the Church in the northern region, it would have taken over half a century to note that Livingstonia Synod pioneered in letting women be elders.

According to Manda (2001:242), the vacuum in male leadership due to men joining the army in the First and Second World Wars necessitated the ordination of women as elders. The researcher is, therefore, of the opinion that women were allowed to be elders after 1939 at the earliest. According to Manda (2001:242), the vacuum of men leadership was created by men signing up in the First and Second World Wars. Permission to have capable women identified and ordained as deacons and elders was only sought after the First and Second World Wars and after others went to work outside the country.

If by “since the birth of the C.C.A.P. in the northern region” Mlenga (2008:3) means the formation of the union between the Blantyre Synod and Livingstonia Synod on 27 September 1924 (Paas 2006:197), this would still refer to a date before World War II. As discussed above, it is unlikely that women were included in leadership positions as deacons and elders before World War II.

For the purpose of this study, it should be noted that, after women were allowed to be elders, it took the Livingstonia Synod until 1977 to recommend the first woman for theological training (Manda 2001:243), namely Miss Esnat Munthali (Mlenga 2008:9). On 17 December 2000, Martha Mwale (nee Chirwa) was the first woman to be ordained as a minister in the Livingstonia Synod (Mlenga 2008: 9). If the Livingstonia Synod had treated men and women equally, they would have introduced programmes to equip and prepare women for positions in the synod equal to those of the men.

The Blantyre Synod only admitted women for theological training in the mid-1990s, and did not allow their ordination even though some had obtained MTh degrees (Manda 2001:243). The Blantyre Synod ordained the first woman minister on 7 January 2001 (Kawale 2001:217).

Although the Livingstonia and Blantyre Synods opened the offices of deacons, elders and ministers to women, this did not appear to be done in order to treat men and women as equals. Very few women have been ordained as ministers and, in fact, only recently. It can therefore be concluded that all three Synods were and still are, to some extent, prejudiced towards women, with the Nkhoma Synod taking an even stricter position against the ordination of women, as indicated below.

## 1.2 THE NKHOMA SYNOD'S POSITION REGARDING THE BIBLE

### 1.2.1 Guide books

The C.C.A.P. Nkhoma Synod (i.e. the governing body of the Synod, comprising of Church elders and ministers) regard the Bible as the Word of God. For them, the Bible's authority is above every other authority. The Church's authority is under the authority of the Bible. The Council of Reformed Churches in Central Africa (CRCCA) (2004:115) states that

the Church, her doctrines, her judgements, her liturgy and everything else about the Church, are built on the firm foundation of the Bible. Care must be taken that all these are judged by the standard of the Bible.<sup>3</sup>

The Nkhoma Synod's position is based on *The Heidelberg Catechism* of 1563 (reprinted 2001) in which the authority of the Bible is emphasised. In response to the question whether images should be tolerated in churches as "books for the laity", the *Catechism* (Olevianus et al 2001:84)<sup>4</sup> states, "He (God) wants his people to be taught not by means of dumb images, but by the living preaching of His Word". To qualify 'His Word', the *Heidelberg Catechism* (Olevianus et al 2001:84) emphasises:

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<sup>3</sup> This also applies to the Blantyre and Livingstonia Synods because they use the same guide book as the Nkhoma Synod.

<sup>4</sup> *The Heidelberg Catechism*, written in 1563, is a guide book which the Nkhoma Synod uses to instruct her members. Every member of the CCAP-Nkhoma Synod is taught the Catechism (or its summary depending on the level of education of the aspirant member) as a prerequisite to baptism, which marks entrance into full membership of the Nkhoma Synod. This study quotes from the 2001 reprinted edition.



All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching,  
rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the  
man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work

For the Nkhoma Synod the inspired, God-breathed word consists of 66 books (39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament). It excludes the Apocrypha. The Pauline letters to the Corinthians, one of the focal points of this study, are included as part of the inspired word of God (CRCCA 2004:118).

It should be noted how far the catechism in use by the Nkhoma Synod is removed from Nkhoma's geographical locality and time. The *Catechism* was specifically tailored to the spiritual need that arose in Germany at that time<sup>5</sup>. Over the centuries Reformed Churches across the world adapted it for their use. However, would people with different needs, backgrounds and cultures necessarily use the Bible the way the *Catechism* stipulates? For example, how does the attitude of the Chewa people towards women affect the way they interpret biblical passages about women? For this reason, it is important to look at the actual interpretation of the Bible in this region.

### **1.2.2 Actual interpretation of the Bible**

Having stated the Nkhoma Synod's position, it is important to examine the actual interpretation of the Bible. The Church is not an academic institution therefore most of the texts written about the Bible are concerned with enhancing the faith of her members and not necessarily with technicalities and biblical scholarship. The literature available in the Nkhoma Synod excludes terms such as 'historical-critical biblical interpretation' and 'dogmatic interpretation', except in academic papers. This is counter-balanced, however, in the ministers' practice and speech. The Nkhoma Synod encourages higher learning for her ministers, many of whom hold bachelor's, masters and doctoral degrees.

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<sup>5</sup> The Council of Reformed Churches in Central Africa (CCRCA), 2004:3

Kawale, one of the Nkhoma Synod ministers and the Synod's General Secretary from 2002 to 2008, is a senior lecturer at one of the nation's universities. According to Kawale (2001:232),

Although there are different interpretations of 1 Cor 14:34-36 and 1 Timothy 2:11-14, three issues seem to be very clear in these texts. First, the texts deal with specific and isolated contexts. The Corinthian and Ephesus congregations had specific indiscipline problems which Paul dealt with. The second issue is that the admonitions in both texts refer to women in Corinth and Ephesus and not to all congregations. Thirdly, the fact that the texts refer to specific contexts and persons signifies that the issues raised in these texts should not be taken as general principles or generic timeless rules... It is, therefore, not correct to apply the issues raised in these texts as if they are general principles of the universal church.

Moreover, Kawale (2001:232) maintains that in 1 Corinthians 14:26-39, Paul is dealing with a problem of women making noise during the church service. He translates the Greek *lalein* in the said text to mean "chatter" or "babble" or extended random harangue (Kawale 2001:232). Kawale's interpretation is typical of Nkhoma Synod ministers who employ historical-critical biblical if not social-scientific biblical interpretation. In some cases literary or narrative interpretation is also employed.

However, there is still a strong tendency towards literal and dogmatic interpretation in the church, or what Schüssler-Fiorenza (1992:197) terms seeking to uphold the doctrine of the Church. Ordinary members of the Church, including church elders, who have not had theological training, understand the Bible literally and give the impression that the Scriptures belong exclusively to the Church and should therefore be interpreted by the Church in the way the Church regards correct (Schüssler-Fiorenza 1992:39, 40). With the heavy leaning towards literal and dogmatic interpretation by some ministers, and lay preachers' almost exclusive use thereof, this is still the most influential type of interpretation. It should also be borne in mind that there is a critical shortage of church ministers in the Nkhoma Synod. Accordingly, several congregations sometimes share

one minister<sup>6</sup>. In such cases, the minister attends to each congregation only part of the allotted time while lay preachers preside over services and preach the sermons the rest of the time.

In the light of the Nkhoma Synod's position on the Bible and its actual method of interpretation, the study wished to determine whether or not the said interpretations had and still have any effect on the attitude of men towards women, or even women's attitude towards their own status in the Church.

### 1.3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Females constitute 51% of the total population of Malawi (Saur, Semu & Ndauro 2005:11). In many churches, including the C.C.A.P., then, the majority of the members are women (Phiri 1992:66). Women usually dominate church gatherings as well. In this context, the Chikuluti Congregation of the Nkhoma Synod addressed the following question to the board which looks at rules and regulations (*Bungwe la Zolamulira*) of the Synod (Question 24 to the *Bungwe la Zolaumulira* meeting in 2005).

Is the time not yet ripe, mother (Nkhoma) Synod, that women should take part in preaching the word of God during Wednesday meetings, since women's presence makes the majority during these meetings?

In this regard it should be clarified that the fact that a local congregation asked such a question does not mean that local congregations in their entirety advocate the uplifting of women. At congregation level, these questions are mostly asked by individuals and they are not necessarily scrutinised before they are sent. A question asked by an individual does not represent the views of the general membership of the congregation.

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<sup>6</sup>For example, in December 2008 Thumba Presbytery, with seven congregations, had only two ministers. By March 30, 2009 the situation had improved slightly and they had three ministers. This is not unique to Thumba.

Women appear to be better organised in the C.C.A.P. Nkhoma Synod than men. For example, women formed a well organised Women's Guild which has existed as an integral part of the church since 1940 (The Nkhoma Synod 2006b:81). The establishment of the Men's Guild on the other hand was discussed for the first time at Synod level in 2001 (minute S 3400 of Synod meetings)<sup>7</sup> and was only established in 2004<sup>8</sup>. In funerals of church members, women sit around the corpse, irrespective of the condition of the corpse, singing church hymns. Men sit outside the house in the open fresh air. Through the Women's Guild, women make far greater financial contributions to the church than their male counterparts (The Nkhoma Synod 2006a:6). Despite women membership being in the majority, and despite the fact that women are more active in giving to the church and in other church activities, and women are better organised than men, women are nevertheless marginalised in the sense that they are not allowed to be ordained as deacons, church elders or church ministers in the Nkhoma Synod. The two sister synods in Malawi, however, allow women to be ordained as deacons, church elders and church ministers (Kawale 2001:216, 217). This raises the question of the cause of this marginalisation of women in the Nkhoma Synod.

It is important to state that both the Livingstonia and Blantyre Synods, like the Nkhoma Synod, use *The Council of Reformed Churches in Central Africa*, 2004, as the guide book for their view and use of the Bible. Thus they, like the Nkhoma Synod, regard the Pauline writings as the authoritative Word of God. The important question is why the two sister synods of the Nkhoma Synod allow women in leadership positions while the Nkhoma Synod refuses to do so. Part of the answer, provided during oral interviews, is that the Nkhoma Synod ministers regard the two sister synods as being liberal. This view seems to be as old as the existence of the three synods. According to Paas (2006:197), a lecturer of the Zomba Theological College, which trains ministers for all three synods of the C.C.A.P. in Malawi, at the formation of the C.C.A.P., initially only the Blantyre and Livingstonia Synods were members because the leadership of Nkhoma (the then Dutch Reformed Mission) "feared that modernistic teaching would be brought into the C.C.A.P.

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<sup>7</sup> Also check minute S 3236 of the Synod meetings

<sup>8</sup> An interview with Rev. Banda, Presbytery Clerk for Chilanga Presbytery of Nkhoma Synod

by missionaries from Scotland, as some of their missionaries, working in South Africa, were accused of denying the atonement and various other doctrines”.

Paas (2006:197) states that the Nkhoma Synod joined the union called the C.C.A.P. only “after being satisfied that the conditions and safeguards the Dutch Reformed Mission Church desired were included in the constitution”. Clearly, then, the Nkhoma Synod was not influenced by what went on in the other two synods.

#### **1.4 OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

As indicated above, in the Nkhoma Synod women are marginalised in the sense that they are not allowed to participate in leadership positions. Since the church regards itself as governed by the Word of God, it is important to determine to what extent this marginalisation is influenced by the Word of God and its interpretations. The objective of this study is specifically to find out whether this marginalisation is related to Paul’s prescriptions to women in his writings, specifically those in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and 14:34, 35.

In order to achieve the objective, a variety of interpretations of these passages are discussed in detail. The researcher, moreover, developed a questionnaire for data collection. The questions were aimed at detecting whether or not 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and 14:34, 35 have any influence on people’s attitudes towards women.

#### **1.5 LITERATURE REVIEW AND THE NECESSITY OF RESEARCHING THE TOPIC**

##### **1.5.1 Literature review**

In the literature review the researcher found no other work on the topic besides Phiri’s (1992) doctoral thesis on *African women in religion and culture – Chewa women in the Nkhoma Synod of the Church of Central Africa, Presbyterian: a critical study from*

*women's perspective.* Phiri indicates that women leadership in the Chewa religion renders the excuse of culture for not including women in the Nkhoma Synod leadership as unjustified and provides biblical reasons used to prohibit women from becoming deacons, church elders and ministers in the Nkhoma Synod of the C.C.A.P. Phiri (1992:94, 95) refers specifically to Genesis (1:26-27; 2:18-22, and 3:16) and Paul's letters, especially 1 Corinthians 11:7-10 and 14:34-35, and 1 Timothy 2:11-14, as the basis for not allowing women to occupy positions of leadership in the church. In her view, what is written in 1 Timothy 2:11-14 was a cultural requirement and not a divine mandate and, therefore, is not and should not be taken as a universal command. She does not explain or interpret 1 Corinthians 11:7–10 and 14:34–35, however, because her main concern is proving that in the Chewa religion and to some extent the Chewa culture, leadership roles were in the hands of women.

### **1.5.2 The necessity of research on the topic**

The Church is an integral part of society. On Friday, 29 August, 2008 the State President of Malawi was awarded the Millennium Development Goal (MDG3) Champion Torch in Oslo, Norway at the African Green Revolution Conference, for his efforts in promoting women in Malawi (Mana 2008a: 6). In his acknowledgement of the honour, the President stated (Mana 2008b: 5).

When I was awarded the torch of recognition for my government's role in promoting women, I readily accepted it on behalf of Malawians. I believe this is a sign that the work of our women is recognised worldwide.

This incident indicates that the equality of men and women is generally a crucial issue.

Malawi is a signatory to a number of international human rights conventions. The *United Nations Development Assistance Framework, 2002-2006* (UNDAF) (2001:vi) lists thirteen international human rights conventions to which Malawi is a signatory. Of these, the 1952 Convention on Political Rights of Women and the 1979 Convention on the

Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) directly address the rights of women and the 1949 Convention on the Suppression of Traffic in Persons and the exploitation of Prostitution of others mostly affects women more than men.<sup>9</sup> It is actually stated that the CEDAW was the first international human rights treaty to be ratified by Malawi (Malawi Human Rights Commission 2003:85). It should also be noted that the United Nations Development Assistance Framework concerning Malawi “aim[ed] at increasing the level of meaningful popular participation in national affairs and economically empowering of local communities, especially...women”<sup>10</sup>. Article 30(1) of the Malawi Constitution (1999:20) stipulates that

All persons and people have a right to development and therefore to the enjoyment of economic, social, cultural and political development and *women*<sup>11</sup>, children and the disabled in particular shall be given special consideration in the application of this right.<sup>12</sup>(researcher’s emphasis)

Regarding the rights of women, the UNDAF (United Nations 2001:9) states that since Malawi became a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, in 1987, the state has adjusted its constitution to guarantee equality of women to men and

[a]s a follow-up to the global Platform for Action adopted at the Beijing Conference, the Government formulated a National Plan of Action (NFPA) in 1997, in which the following priority areas were identified:

- Poverty alleviation;
- Empowerment (*of*)<sup>13</sup> women [sic];
- The girl child;
- Violence against women; and
- Peace.

Progress has also been made in formulating and implementing a gender policy<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> 2002-2006 United Nations Development Assistance Framework concerning Malawi, 2001:vi

<sup>10</sup> 2002-2006 United Nations Development Assistance Framework concerning Malawi, 2001:xi

<sup>11</sup> Italics are mine

<sup>12</sup> The Constitution of the Republic of Malawi, page 18

<sup>13</sup> I have inserted “*of*” hence the italics.

<sup>14</sup> 2002-2006 United Nations Development Assistance Framework (Malawi), 2001:9

The above examples indicate the state and world bodies' concern for the implementation of equality of women and men. In the light of this global concern over equality, the Church cannot afford to adhere to discrimination against women. This motivated the researcher to examine to what extent, if any, prescriptions on women in the Pauline writings influence the participation of women in the Nkhoma Synod. The findings and recommendations of the study would help the Church to make proper use of the Pauline writings in relation to how women should be treated. This could subsequently also have a positive effect on society, because the way women are treated in the Church affects the status of women in other areas as well.

## **1.6 METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES USED IN THE STUDY**

Since the intention is not to come up with an “original” interpretation of the relevant Pauline passages, but to provide a number of recent interpretations informed by important contemporary insights (e.g. gender-critical ones), one specific methodology has not been developed and implemented. After the discussion of the different interpretations (chapter 4), some remarks are made about the researcher's own preferences.

With regard to methodology it is also important to mention that a critical comparative study with the work of Phiri is undertaken in the dissertation. This will show how far the Nkhoma Synod has changed regarding the marginalisation of women since Phiri conducted her research in the early 1990s.

As indicated in 1.6.1 and 1.6.2 and documented in the bibliography, other written and oral sources were also used.

### **1.6.1 Oral sources**

The researcher conducted face-to-face (one-on-one) interviews with the respondents. For this purpose he compiled some questions which were used as an interview guide. The researcher found interviews effective because they allowed for elaboration when the



respondents wished to do so. In addition, the researcher wished to classify some responses according to biblical, cultural, or both biblical and cultural reasons (see question 6 a, b and c of the questionnaire). This was done without the respondents' knowledge in order not to influence their responses. The target groups were those in leadership positions at synod level and congregation level. Leaders at synod level were chosen because they make or ratify policies. Those at congregation level implement the policies. Since women were at the centre of this study, women at various levels were also interviewed. Furthermore, the researcher interviewed both men and women not in leadership positions in order to gain the followers' perceptions (perspective).

### 1.6.2 Written sources

The researcher conducted a literature review covering firstly, written sources of the Nkhoma Synod, namely *Zolamulira* - the rules and regulations of the Nkhoma Synod; *Malongosoledwe a Chigwirizano cha Amai* - on the women's guild; *Moyo ndi Ntchito za Akuluampingo ndi Atumiki*<sup>15</sup> by J.S. Mwale on the life and job description of church elders and deacons, and minutes of various Synod meetings. Secondly, the researcher consulted journals, commentaries, and books.

## 1.7 LIMITATIONS

The researcher was aware of the following possible limitations:

- The interviewees who were in church leadership positions could consequently be subjective.
- Of the women interviewed, some suffered from being indoctrinated by the leadership. In her study, Phiri (1992:203) found that in some cases women have opposed the inclusion of women in leadership positions in the church. This comes from women who have internalized their own oppression in the domestic sphere and in the church.

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<sup>15</sup> The Synod mandated Rev JS Mwale to write this book (see bibliography) as a guide to how church elders should conduct their lives and discharge their duties. The Synod directs all church elders and deacons to buy this book and practise what it says (see *Zolamulira*, 2006:43).

- Some who had not internalized their oppression, but were instead tired of it, could give an exaggerated response. This in turn might result in what Kawale (2001:234) calls radical feminism degenerating into intolerance and fanaticism.

Therefore, care was taken that these three situations did not have a major effect on the information given. To minimize the effects of church elders being subjective, male members of the church, who were not elders, were interviewed as well. Their responses were compared with those of elders and were very similar. Probing techniques were also used to minimize all the cited limitations. After an answer was given, there was more probing to make sure that the response was not completely influenced by the respondent's feelings.

Finally, as a male member and church elder of C.C.A.P. Nkhoma Synod the researcher wrote from that perspective while at the same time trying, however, to be as objective as possible.

## **1.8 SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

The study covered the life of the Nkhoma Synod from its establishment in 1889 to June 2007 when the dissertation proposal was drafted.

The area under research was the Nkhoma Synod of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (C.C.A.P.). Mindful of the fact that the problem stated may not necessarily be unique to the Nkhoma Synod, examples from other areas in Africa were cited, showing that in the case of the marginalisation of women, African cultures appear to be quite similar. Although there are many other influences on the role of women in the Nkhoma Synod of the C.C.A.P., the study focused on crucial Pauline passages. Other influences on the role of women have not been considered because of space and time.

## **1.9 OUTLINE OF THE STUDY**

Chapter 1 introduces the study and briefly describes the C.C.A.P. in Malawi and the variations of patriarchy practised in the three C.C.A.P. synods; the Nkhoma Synod's position on and interpretation of the Bible; the need for research on the topic, and the objective, scope and limitations of the study.

Chapter 2 discusses the role of women in the C.C.A.P., Nkhoma Synod.

Chapter 3 describes the wider context of the Nkhoma Synod.

Chapter 4 discusses crucial Pauline passages on the role of women.

Chapter 5 discusses a survey of current perceptions.

Chapter 6 concludes the study and proposes a way forward.

## **1.10 CONCLUSION**

This chapter described how women are generally marginalised in all the C.C.A.P. Synods in Malawi. Although the Blantyre and Livingstonia Synods allow women to be ordained as deacons, elders and ministers, this was done mainly for practical reasons and not in the pursuit of equality between men and women. The ordination of women to ministerial positions in the Blantyre and Livingstonia Synods is a very recent development and the number of women ministers in these synods is negligible. For various reasons literal/uncritical interpretation still has a great influence in the Nkhoma Synod, despite Nkhoma ministers being well educated and informed on other forms of interpretation. Clearly, women's rights are an important issue both nationally and globally. In view of this, the church should consider it expedient to reassess the policy of marginalising women.

## CHAPTER 2

### The role of women in C.C.A.P. – Nkhoma Synod

#### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1 pointed out that women are marginalised in the Nkhoma Synod and, to a lesser extent, in other synods of the C.C.A.P. This chapter discusses this marginalisation by the Nkhoma Synod in greater detail.

In the C.C.A.P., Nkhoma Synod women were and still are kept away from important leadership positions. As stated earlier, a woman is not allowed to be a deacon, church elder or church minister. Until recently, a woman was not supposed to preach in church whenever men were present<sup>16</sup>. This also applied to preaching in places other than the church where men formed part of the audience. A request was once made to the Synod to allow a women's guild member to preach at the funeral of a fellow guild member. The answer from the Synod was "No, it is not permissible for a woman to preach at a funeral" (The Nkhoma Synod 2006b:122).

#### 2.2 WOMEN'S ROLE THROUGH THE WOMEN'S GUILD

This section describes women's role and status in the church. The Women's Guild shows women's involvement and status in the church.

##### 2.2.1 Background

The Women's Guild, vernacularly known as *Chigwirizano cha Amayi*, is an integral part of the C.C.A.P., Nkhoma Synod. The Nkhoma Synod deliberated the possibility of establishing it in 1939. In 1940, the Guild started in only five congregations with a total of hundred members (The Nkhoma Synod 2006a:1). The five congregations were Mchinji, Dzenza, Malingunde, Kongwe and Nkhoma and according to Phiri (1992) the

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<sup>16</sup> The ban prohibiting women from preaching whenever men are present was lifted in October 2007.

total number of members in all these congregations at that time was one hundred and three (Phiri 1992:143).

By 1988, two hundred and twenty (220) congregations had established a Women's Guild and the number of members had grown to 19,000 (The Nkhoma Synod 2006a:1).

### **2.2.2 Aims of the Women's Guild**

The aims of the Women's Guild were to enhance women's substantial participation through unity; allow women to exercise their spiritual gifts for the benefit of the whole group and church, and give women an opportunity to give to the church their financial contributions for the smooth running of the Lord's work (The Nkhoma Synod 2006a: 2).

### **2.2.3 Women's perception of *Chigwirizano cha Amai***

The women greatly appreciated the establishment of *Chigwirizano Cha Amai* because for them it was a sign of maturity in Christianity. According to Phiri (1992:147, 148) before the establishment of *Chigwirizano cha Amai* the women had a feeling that God's work could only be done by men:

Thank you Presbytery for allowing Chigwirizano to start. We already see the advantages of having chigwirizano such as revival meetings among women, knowing one another as we discuss the Word of God and have fellowship, raising transport money for the women who are going to introduce Chigwirizano to other villages. What I like most is that women too have got a chance to help others even though we ourselves are not well off. I am strengthened by John 9:4 where Jesus said that we must do God's work while it is still day for night is coming when no one can work. Now that we have been sent to do God's work, even though we are women, we can do it.<sup>17</sup> We have realised in a new way that women are not useless. We are friends of the Lord of lords, we have found special respect in Christianity...We rejoice

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<sup>17</sup> Phiri quotes from a letter from Lida Naphiri from Mchinji which appeared in *Mthenga* of March – April, 1940, p14

on hearing that Presbytery has accepted women to start Chigwirizano. Thank you. Acts 2:17 says 'In the last days, God says I will pour out my Spirit on all the people. Your sons and Daughters will prophesy...' Who are Daughters? Are we not the ones?<sup>18</sup>

The above quotation gives the impression that before the introduction of *Chigwirizano cha Amai*, the women had no chance to share the word of God among even fellow women. They saw *Chigwirizano cha Amai* as a forum to express themselves and a step forward in the enhancement of their status. They called themselves "friends of the Lord of lords"; "daughters (who) will prophesy" along with the sons, and those that "have been sent to do God's work". For the women, the introduction of *Chigwirizano cha Amai* marked the beginning of a new era.

### **2.2.3.1 Leadership of *Chigwirizano cha Amai***

When *Chigwirizano cha Amai* was established in five stations, from 1940 to 1959, the leadership or head in each station was the wife of a European (White) minister (Phiri 1992:144). Change of leadership of *Chigwirizano cha Amai* is also indicative of the change of status of the African women. In 1959, *Chigwirizano cha Amai* leadership changed to Malawian women taking first positions, and missionary women taking second positions. In 1989, the synod decided that *Chigwirizano cha Amai* should be led by ministers' wives. This could have been intended to ensure that ministers and their wives had control of the synod as well as *Chigwirizano cha Amai* (Phiri 1992:149, 150, 159). With the marginalisation of women in the Church leadership, women might have felt that they had found a way to discharge their leadership skills through *Chigwirizano cha Amai*, only to discover that that had also been taken away from them and given to ministers through their wives.

### **2.2.3.2 Uniform**

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<sup>18</sup> Phiri quotes from a letter from MB Lebetina Chimsale of Kampango Nsadzū which appeared in Mthenga, of July – August, 1940, p14)

*Chigwirizano cha Amai* uniform has changed considerably from the time of its introduction to the present. From 1940 to 1966 the uniform was simply a head scarf (*duku*) and a badge. But from 1966, a long-sleeved blouse, a black skirt and black shoes were included after the Nkhoma Synod *Chigwirizano cha Amai* women were impressed by the Zimbabwe *Chigwirizano cha Amai* women's uniform. The basic uniform remains the head scarf, although full uniform is mandatory for those in leadership positions of *Chigwirizano cha Amai* and recommended for those who can afford it (Phiri, 1992:164, 165, 166, 167). The *duku* is apparently still more important than the rest of the uniform because it suffices as uniform on its own. On the day of entering *Chigwirizano cha Amai*, a prospective member is required to bring a financial contribution called *mafuta* (which is money required to help with the running of *Chigwirizano cha Amai*), and a white head scarf, locally known as *duku* (Phiri 1992:154). It is not clear whether the *duku* as uniform is connected with Paul's requirement in 1 Corinthians 11:4-10. However, the importance of *Chigwirizano cha Amai* uniform should be noted. A woman in the uniform is given special recognition in the church including a special place to sit. Even if a *Chigwirizano cha Amai* woman comes late, she will find a seat in the church building while a non-uniformed latecomer, whether female or male, is left outside. Her uniform is so important that it can only be worn at the funeral of a deacon, church elder or church minister, besides the normal times of wearing it. So the woman in uniform has an elevated status in the church.

### **2.2.3.3 Financial contributions**

Their financial contributions to the running of the church also distinguish *Chigwirizano cha Amai* women. Three contributions were introduced at different times since the establishment of *Chigwirizano cha Amai*. *Mafuta*, which symbolises the Spirit who keeps the lamp of *Chigwirizano cha Amai* going, started in 1940 (Phiri 1992:168). In 1978 compassionate service money or *za chifundo* (*chifundo* means compassion) was introduced. This is used to help the needy and the sick. In 1988, *za chitukuko* (development fund) was introduced (Phiri 1992:170). In addition to the contributions to the construction of the first girls' secondary school in 1983 and the building of

Malingunde Women's Training Centre which opened in 1992, Phiri (1992:147) says that "*Chigwirizano cha Amai* has involved itself in projects that are specifically aimed at lifting the status of women. Education of women has been a priority". In the researcher's view, this was not done with the primary aim of lifting women's status. They built other structures at various levels which did not necessarily cater for women or girls directly. For example, the *Chigwirizano cha Amai* request to the synod for a piece of land at the synod headquarters to build a structure which would alleviate the synod's housing problem to accommodate the workers<sup>19</sup>. However, what is crucial is that women feel important because they are given an opportunity to give towards the running of the church and to others who are needy.

#### **2.2.4 'Limited' freedom through the Women's Guild**

In the researcher's view women's freedom in Women's Guild is 'limited' freedom because although this guild is a women's body, male dominance is still apparent.

##### **2.2.4.1 Women's Guild gatherings**

The Women's Guild convenes three basic kinds of gatherings, namely monthly meetings, revival meetings, and the main meetings (The Nkhoma Synod 2006a: 5,6,9)

From the inception of the *Chigwirizano cha Amai*, women were only allowed to preach at monthly meetings, since those gathered were women only, apart from the church elder (called *Mkhalapakati*) who was later introduced. The presence of the latter implies that there is still male dominance, since even though this meeting is held at church level, women are not supposed to meet without a *Mkhalapakati*, who is a church elder, and consequently male. This is expressly stipulated in the rules and regulations concerning the Women's Guild (The Nkhoma Synod 2006a: 3):

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<sup>19</sup> See section 2.2.4.2 of this dissertation .



The Women's Guild is an integral part of the Church. They should, therefore, endeavour to keep the unity that exists in the Lord's Church in all their dealings. They should make sure they accord the leaders of the Church (who are male) their due respect. They should always request the presence of the church elder or church minister whenever they meet ... The church elder will then give a report to the session [a gathering of church elders and deacons – hence of men].

The statement of the mandatory need to involve *Mkhalapakati* (i.e., “should always request the presence”) nevertheless leaves the women no choice. It is a mandatory requirement. Although it can be argued that *Mkhalapakati's* reason for congregating with women is for him to coordinate between *Chigwirizano cha Amai* and the session, other ways of keeping the session informed could be employed; for example, writing to the session, or sending female representatives to the session to be there just during the time of reporting. If one man sits amid women, as *Mkhalapakati*, what is wrong with one or two women being present in the session to report about *Chigwirizano cha Amai's* activities?

Revival meetings are held once a year and the women are not left to organise these on their own. Instead, the church minister and the church elders of the place where the revival meeting is taking place are heavily involved. This has advantages and disadvantages for women. The advantage is that women are assisted in the preparatory work, such as erecting tents and other shelters. The disadvantage is that men make the important decisions on matters which concern women. For instance, the main speaker in the revival meetings is a church minister (male) and the women are told to pay the church minister who is the speaker at the revival meeting. The liturgy, however, is done by a woman, who is also to be paid (The Nkhoma Synod 2006a: 6, 7). *Zolamulira* (The Nkhoma Synod 2006b:84) adds that church elders should help in organising meetings so that all should be done in the proper order. This gives the impression that men are involved in organising these meetings not to assist the women or alleviate the heavy organisational burden, but because women are less able.

The main meetings of the Women's Guild are held once every three years (The Nkhoma Synod 2006a: 9; The Nkhoma Synod 2006b:82). Three to four months before the main meeting takes place, a preliminary meeting, referred to as *kukhoma msonkhano*, is held at the proposed venue of the main meeting. It is chaired by the wife of the resident minister of the proposed venue. Other women who attend are the leader of *Chigwirizano cha Amai* of the proposed venue together with her secretary and treasurer. Each station or substation (if the station is so partitioned) sends a representative. The main matter to sort out during this meeting is to find out how much is needed to run the four day main meeting and how much each participating congregation will have to contribute. It is important to mention that although the meeting is chaired by the minister's wife, *mkhalapakati* (male) from the proposed venue has to be present during the meeting. In other words, male influence comes both directly (through *mkhalapakati*) and indirectly (through the minister's wife).

During the main meeting, although those gathered are women, the speaker is male – a church minister. A woman speaker would have been more appropriate. She does not need to be told about problems unique to women which have to be addressed, since she has first-hand experience of them. The topic is chosen by a minister (male) who writes an annual guide for *Chigwirizano cha Amai*. Men are usually not mandated to attend this meeting. However, every *mkhalapakati* is supposed to attend the meeting and every minister's wife is also supposed to attend.

Although men assist with the construction of shelters, their influence is far reaching and in some cases undermines the women's ability to conduct their own affairs. For example, men are chosen to be in a committee, together with women, to run the finances which have been contributed. The influence of the male main speaker and of *mkhalapakatis* should also not be underestimated. The other ministers may influence the women through their wives who are in attendance.

This main meeting should not be confused with the synod meeting of *Chigwirizano cha Amai*, which usually takes place at the synod's lay training centre. This meeting is

convened to teach women how to run *Chigwirizano cha Amai* and the teacher or instructor is a chosen minister consequently male (The Nkhoma Synod 2006b:82).

#### **2.2.4.2 Women's financial support**

In addition to the Sunday offerings and monthly pledges, which every Christian is obligated to give to the Church, through the Women's Guild the women pay *za mafuta* (money for the general running of the church), *za chifundo* (money to help the needy), and *za chitukuko* (money used for erecting new churches and other structures) (The Nkhoma Synod 2006a: 6). Women do more in terms of development in the church and financial contributions, both at congregation and Synod levels. Moreover, their help is usually unsolicited. For example, the minutes of the meeting of Bungwe Lotsogolera on 20 May 2005 at Lilongwe CCAP (Minute M. 6357) reads:

The Women's Guild are requesting for a piece of land from the Synod so that they could erect a building on it in order to alleviate the housing problem which the Synod faces to accommodate her workers. The committee stresses that the Nkhoma Management Team should accord the requested land to the women.<sup>20</sup>

This indicates that even in their giving women still need to seek permission from the Nkhoma Synod decision-making body, which consists of men only.

Clearly, then, male dominance has infiltrated the Women's Guild right from the beginning. This restricts the women from making their own decisions on how their organisation should be run. However, the women's service to the church is unparalleled.

#### **2.2.5 Church leaders' perception and reaction**

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<sup>20</sup> Minute M. 6357 of the meeting of Bungwe Lotsogolera which met on 20 May 2005 at Lilongwe C.C.A.P.

The church leaders' perception of *Chigwirizano cha Amai* appears suspicious because of a number of impositions the leaders have made on *Chigwirizano cha Amai*. According to Phiri (1992:141), while the women look at *Chigwirizano cha Amai* as a forum where they display their leadership, evangelistic and other talents, church leaders are afraid that it will degenerate into a 'Church in a Church'. The leadership, seeing this development, are doing everything possible to keep women in check.

#### **2.2.5.1 Mkhalapakati**

According to Phiri (1992:141), the suspicion that *Chigwirizano cha Amai* would become a church within the Nkhoma Synod Church forced the Synod to introduce *Mkhalapakati* – a male representative. The introduction of *Mkhalapakati* is in the section titled "*Kugwirizana (kwa Chigwirizano cha Amai) ndi mpingo*"<sup>21</sup> and reads as follows (The Nkhoma Synod 1970:112):

*Achigwirizano ali ciwalo cina ca mpingo. Asunge umodzi wa mpingo wa Ambuye mwa zocita zao zonse.*  
(Members of *chigwirizano* are part and parcel of the church.  
They should endeavour to maintain the unity that exists in the Lord's Church. [own translation]).

Phiri is therefore justified in saying that the Church is suspicious of *Chigwirizano cha Amai*. The need for *Chigwirizano cha Amai* to report to the session (a body of elders) for the smooth running of the church should also be noted. The problem is not that women cannot meet without a *mkhalapakati* (who at the moment has to be male), but that in the body of elders there is no female who can be assigned the duty of coordinating between *Chigwirizano cha Amai* and the session. The *mkhalapakati*'s job may probably be to keep a check on *Chigwirizano cha Amai*, but also to update the session on the activities of the *Chigwirizano cha Amai*. The expressed job description of a *mkhalapakati* (The Nkhoma Synod 2006a:3) is as that "he should be present during *chigwirizano* meetings, report writing sessions and he should report to the session on the activities of *chigwirizano*".

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<sup>21</sup> The translation of these words is: "The Unity of Chigwirizano and the Church"

It can be argued that this is not unique to *Chigwirizano cha Amai*. It is a requirement to the body of the youth as well. In fact as far as the body of the youth is concerned, the synod put in place an extra minister to monitor the activities of the youth at every presbytery level (The Nkhoma Synod 1970:15). But it should be borne in mind that the youth are regarded as inferior to women just as they are to men – while women are equally grown-ups as men in leadership.

It is not clear when the position of *mkhalapakati* was introduced in *Chigwirizano cha Amai*. However, it did not start from the beginning of *Chigwirizano cha Amai*. *Zolamulira* (The Nkhoma Synod 1970:113) implies that the position of *mkhalapakati* was introduced later:

Members of *chigwirizano* are part and parcel of the church. They should endeavour to maintain the unity that exists in the Lord's Church ... they can even request an elder or a minister to join them in their meetings. The session should choose one elder so that the elder joins the women when they meet."

This statement indicates that the women used to meet without a *mkhalapakati*, until the church leaders decided to address the problem of a possible "church within a church" by introducing a *mkhalapakati*.

#### **2.2.5.2 Ministers' wives in *Chigwirizano cha Amai* leadership**

When *Chigwirizano cha Amai* was established in 1940, it was headed by wives of European ministers up to 1959 (see section 2.2.3.1). In 1959, leadership changed to Malawian women. However, in 1989, the synod decided that *Chigwirizano cha Amai* at top level should be led by ministers' wives. From this Phiri (1992:149, 150, 159) concludes that this was done to make sure that ministers and their wives have control of the synod as well as *Chigwirizano cha Amai*. Moreover, it should be noted that the minister at synod level prepares the yearly guide of *Chigwirizano cha Amai*, which is called *Mau a Mwezi ndi Mwezi*. The minister is paid by *Chigwirizano cha Amai* for preparing the said yearly guide (Phiri 1992:160).

As with the introduction of *mkhalapakati* in the midst of *Chigwirizano cha Amai* gatherings, ministers' wives as leaders of *Chigwirizano cha Amai* allow male dominance to keep a check on *Chigwirizano cha Amai* activities. While women are finding freedom in the male-dominated church through their involvement with *Chigwirizano cha Amai*, men try to retain control by introducing *mkhalapakati* and letting ministers rule through their wives.

## **2.3 OTHER AREAS OF WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE CHURCH**

Women's contribution to the Nkhoma Synod is not only through *Chigwirizano cha Amai*. Women have helped in various areas in the Synod, including education, health and evangelism. Through these contributions some people's social status has improved.

### **2.3.1 Education**

Education is indispensable for effective political participation, and a means for people to sustain themselves. Education is a key to preserving languages and religions and a foundation for the eradication of discrimination. In today's world, education is critical if one is to enjoy all human rights.<sup>22</sup>

With such importance attached to the education of youth, the Nkhoma Synod, like other synods, plays an important role in educating the nation. The synod has over seven hundred primary and secondary schools and many of Malawi's important citizens have gone through Nkhoma Synod schools. The first state president of Malawi had his early education in Nkhoma Synod schools (Kawale 2001:213). The Nkhoma Synod efforts to establish schools to supplement government schools is highly regarded and appreciated. Schools are few and far between and the pupil/teacher ratio is estimated at 140:1.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> National Action Plan for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in Malawi, for the period 2004 – 2011, 37.

<sup>23</sup> National Action Plan for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in Malawi, for the period 2004 – 2011, 39.

The Nkhoma Synod has played a significant role in transforming people's lives through education. Furthermore, better professional services would not be possible without the Nkhoma Synod's contribution. Women have taken an active part in helping the Nkhoma Synod make this important contribution to the nation. Regarding the education system in the Nkhoma Synod, Kawale (2001:214) refers to Phiri's (1992:146) statement that

Women have actively participated in this transformation agent. Many women are teachers in these schools. Some of them are head teachers. At one time a lady member of the Nkhoma Synod became Minister of Education. Furthermore some of the members of the Chigwirizano conduct home economics and adult literacy courses in their communities.

### **2.3.2 Health**

The 2004–2011 Malawi National Action Plan states that

The right to health is one of the most important rights to the realization of the human development. The state of health of the population in any country has a direct effect on its productivity. The right to health entails that every person has a right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standards of physical and mental health that is necessary for economic, social and political development. This right also includes access to health care services as well as reproductive health.<sup>24</sup>

Although health services are vital, long queues in hospitals and clinics are not an uncommon sight in the country. To say that Government medical facilities and personnel are overstretched is an understatement. The Government tries to provide preventive and curative treatment to the people. This is hampered by resource constraints, the high level of illiteracy, shortage and poor distribution of trained staff, frequent shortages of equipment, drugs and medical supplies, and inadequate and deteriorating health care

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<sup>24</sup> National Action Plan for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in Malawi, for the period 2004 – 2011, page 66.

infrastructure. The shortage of trained staff is so acute that the average doctor/population ratio earlier this decade was 1:150,000.<sup>25</sup>

Nkhoma Synod helped alleviate this problem by opening a number of hospitals and clinics (Pauw 1980:184-190). Kawale (2001:214) states that many people access preventive and curative treatment through these Nkhoma Synod hospitals and clinics. An important matter to note is that women play a crucial role in this Synod endeavour. Women work as nurses, midwives and matrons in these hospitals and clinics. Some women are teachers at the Synod's nursing school. Some women members of the Nkhoma Synod serve in government and other hospitals and clinics (Kawale 2001:214). So while the Nkhoma Synod plays a major role in health services, women's role cannot be overstated.

### **2.3.3 Evangelistic endeavours**

Evangelism is at the heart of Nkhoma Synod activities. The Synod achieves this through Sunday and Wednesday services in addition to regular revival meetings (Kawale 2001:212). Evangelism is also done in mission schools where students/pupils are taught the word of God (The Nkhoma Synod 2006b:20).

Although prior to October 2007 women were not allowed to preach to men, women play a very 'aggressive' part in evangelism. Apart from sharing testimonies in their monthly and annual meetings, women go from door to door evangelising the people in their neighbourhood (Kawale 2001:213). In this door-to-door evangelism they speak to both men and women. Since women also teach in mission schools, they evangelise to the students as well. Kawale (2001:213) adds further

[T]he Church in Nkhoma Synod is growing and remains very strong because the women in their evangelistic outreach have helped many Christians to keep their faith. In other words, women have assisted to maintain the socio-religious

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, page 68



transformation of the people in Nkhoma Synod. This is because many women have helped their husbands to accept Christ as their Lord. These Christian women have also been instrumental and influential in teaching their own children the Word of God.

#### **2.3.4 Care for the needy**

Women raise funds and collect food for use in caring for the needy (Phiri 1992:143). Kawale (2001:213) emphasises that it is the responsibility of the church to look after those who have spiritual, physical and psychological problems. Women make a major contribution by visiting and counselling the sick, comforting the bereaved and giving assistance to the poor (Kawale 2001:213). This is an important area of service which the Synod is expected to render. The women, therefore, complement the Synod's efforts. Although men disapprove of women's leadership roles, and do not like to see women preach, in this particular area they are bound to accept women's services.

#### **2.3.5 Instructresses**

Instructing members (*chilangizo*) is an important exercise in the Nkhoma Synod. *Chilangizo* is a significant issue pertaining to church running (The Nkhoma Synod 2006b: 9, 11-14). If a Nkhoma Synod member joined the church as an infant, (s)he will have undergone *chilangizo* at six levels. The first level is *chilangizo* done to infants at an age when they are old enough to be instructed. The second level is to children who have reached puberty. The third level is to those who fall in love with the aim of later getting married. The fourth level is to newly wedded couples. The fifth time is to those who are expecting a child for the first time. Lastly, the sixth level is to those who have had a child born to them for the first time (The Nkhoma Synod 2003:7). *Alangizi* are very important because some parents are shy to mention some of the issues to be covered in instructing their children (The Nkhoma Synod 2006b:11). They are also important because some parents continue to practise heathen ways and it would not be good to entrust the children entirely to their care. The *alangizis* are well informed in what they pass on to those to be instructed.

Women *alangizis* (instructresses) play an important part in instructing members of the Synod at all six levels. Although most of the women's work in instructing is to girls and women, at some level women *alangizis* instruct both men and women, especially at levels 4, 5 and 6 (The Nkhoma Synod 2003:29–36).

## 2.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter discussed the commendable work of the Nkhoma Synod in the Christian, social and economic development of the people of Malawi. In all her endeavours in these important areas, women's contributions have been invaluable. In some areas women's contributions have been unparalleled. In other areas, only the women can fulfil the task at hand; for instance, the task of being woman *mlangizi*.

It is important to note that in all these endeavours, good reasons could be found why men would let women assist them in those particular areas. It should be emphasised that, in all these areas of service, there is not one in which a woman is put in a leadership position. The women have been allowed to exercise their talents in teaching and nursing. It is interesting to note that if any woman has had some theological training, the Nkhoma Synod wants that woman to work among fellow women (Phiri 1992:98). In the Nkhoma Synod, some women hold important positions in the civil service and private sectors. Regarding women in the Nkhoma Synod, Kawale (2001: 214) notes that

....some women are teachers and head teachers in the schools.  
Some hold important leadership roles in government,  
government institutions, NGOs and other secular  
organisations.

Even though the Nkhoma Synod has women with such training in leadership, none is allowed to make use of such leadership training by being a deacon, elder or minister. This creates the impression that women should not be seen to exercise their authority over men.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **The wider context of the Nkhoma Synod**

#### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

In order to address the issues at stake in the dissertation in a meaningful way, it is necessary to relate the Nkhoma Synod to its wider context. In this chapter, the Malawi context will be discussed with the Chewa history as focus of attention. In discussing the history of the Chewa people, their cultural and religious practices will be of particular interest. When Christianity was introduced to the Chewa people, these practices must have influenced the way they received it. The place of women in the Chewa society will especially be scrutinised. The aim is to see how they were perceived in this society, so that the role of 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 and 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 in the marginalisation of women in the Nkhoma Synod is understood properly, in the context of society.

#### **3.2 MALAWI AS A NATION**

##### **3.2.1 General**

Malawi, formerly known as Nyasaland from 1891 to 1964, is located in East Central Africa. It shares its borders with Zambia, Tanzania and Mozambique. It is land locked and is divided into three regions, namely northern, central and southern regions (Phiri 1992:19, 20). The country has four cities. These cities are Blantyre, Lilongwe, Mzuzu (Phiri 1992:20) and the newly promoted Zomba (Mphepo 2008:3). According to *The World Guide* (Brazier et al 2005:361) Malawi has 12,572,372 inhabitants. Although this book was published four years ago, the population is still over twelve and a half million. The Chewa is one of the four ethnic groups and makes 58.3% of Malawi's population. 50% of the population are Christians, 20% Muslims and others follow traditional religions (Brazier et al 2005:361). Phiri's statistics of only 12% of the population as people of Islamic faith (1992:31) is now outdated. Women make up for 51% of the population (Saur, Semu & Ndaun 2005:11).

### 3.2.2 Politics

Malawi became independent on 6 July 1964. Dr. Kamuzu Banda was its first leader (Phiri 1992:22), first as the prime minister, from 1961, and then as president, from 1966 of the then ruling and only party – the Malawi Congress Party (MCP). In 1994, when the country adopted a multi-party system after a referendum, Dr. Banda was succeeded by Dr. Bakili Muluzi of the United Democratic Front (UDF). It should be noted that the Nkhoma Synod supported Dr. Banda and his MCP before, during and after the referendum. The Nkhoma Synod ministers are quoted to have said that the Banda regime was ordained by God. This led to the excommunication of some members of the Nkhoma Synod who were suspected of sympathising with the then proposed multiparty system of government (Chingota 1996: 49). It is said that even after the Livingstonia and Blantyre Synods joined hands to fight against Dr. Banda's regime, the Nkhoma Synod rallied behind Dr. Banda and the MCP without questioning (Ross 1996:35). Dr. Bingu Wa Mthlika became Malawi's president after winning the 2004 presidential elections (Brazier et al 2005:361). Although Brazier et al (2005:361) say that the major political parties are the United Democratic Front (UDF), the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) and the Alliance for Democracy (AFORD), in that order, if numbers of parliamentary seats are indicators, then currently, September 2008, the strongest party is the MCP with 58 seats, followed by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) with 54 seats. The UDF is third with 43 seats. There are 19 independent MPs. The Republican Party and the People's Progressive Party have 5 seats each. The Alliance for Democracy (AFORD) has only one MP. This applies to the People's Transformation Party (PETRA) as well. There are 193 parliamentary seats in the National Assembly<sup>26</sup>.

### 3.2.3 Women

Although women make slightly more than half of the population of Malawi, 38% of them are illiterate. Only 21% of men are illiterate. In urban areas only 16% of the women and

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<sup>26</sup> Official website of the Government of Malawi, [www.malawi.gov.mw](http://www.malawi.gov.mw)

8% of men are illiterate. In the rural areas the situation is worse. 24% and 42% of men and women respectively are illiterate (The Commissioner for Statistics and Census 2004: [www.nso.malawi.net](http://www.nso.malawi.net)). This can partly be explained by the notion that women (girls) are not regarded as equals with men. If there is need to educate one of the two children – a boy and a girl – it will be the boy. If one child has to stay at home to help with house chores, it will be the girl. Manda (2001:240) writes that when Christianity was being introduced, the missionaries' central objective was to evangelise the people of Nyasaland<sup>27</sup>, and to stop slave trade by introducing an alternative trade and commerce. To achieve this

Their strategy was to introduce schools to combat illiteracy in order to enable the Africans to read the Bible on their own. In this enterprise both young girls and boys were recruited, but the boys naturally were in the majority since the girls were normally busy helping their women folk with domestic chores.

This is not unique to Malawi. Townshend echoes a similar concern affecting Zimbabwe. According to her

The track record for various churches in Zimbabwe regarding education has been good, but there has always been the problem that education for girls has not been regarded as important as that of boys. In times like that of the present economic crisis, it is girls who are removed from schools first (2008:76)

According to the 1986 census, 89% of Malawians live in the rural areas and 92.2% of Malawian women live in the rural areas (Phiri 1992:21). Although Phiri's concern is to show that more Malawian women in the rural areas are suffering from poverty than their male counterparts, the difference is not major. The real issue of concern is how many of the women who live in towns do so independent of men's income. With the men/women illiteracy ratio shown above, it is not difficult to guess that more women in towns would depend on men's income. This would give society a reason to expect women to be

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<sup>27</sup> As Malawi was known then

grateful to their husbands, which may mean considering themselves less important than men.

The former president Dr. Hastings Banda emphasized that he was *Nkhoswe* No. 1, pledging protection of women (whom he called his *mbumba*) from any form of abuse. He also encouraged women to become members of parliament and cabinet ministers. Despite this, by 1992 there had been only three female cabinet ministers since independence (Phiri 1992:23). The current state president hails the women in high positions for the good work they have done, and pledges to give more high posts to women (Mana 2008b:5). However, of 43 ministerial positions only 7 are occupied by women (The Commissioner for Statistics and Census 2004: [www.malawi.gov.mw](http://www.malawi.gov.mw)), women taking just over 16% of the positions<sup>28</sup>.

Although Phiri says that boys and girls have equal education opportunities (1992:27), this may be a misrepresentation of reality. For example, the Kamuzu Academy, which Phiri mentioned as offering the same opportunities to girls and boys, at the time of writing her thesis was offering two places to boys for every one place given to girls. The facilities, for example hostels, were built to accommodate this ratio. The 1984 Form 4 class at the Kamuzu Academy comprised of 9 girls and 24 boys (Gaffar & Kachingwe 1984:3). A photo of prefects shows 4 female and 10 male prefects (Gaffar & Kachingwe 1984:28), matching with the approximate 1:2 ratio of girls: boys. In 1989 the Form 2 class comprised of 15 girls and 34 boys, while Form 3 had 12 girls and 32 boys. Similar ratios appear for all the other Forms in that year (Ilgunas 1986:19). The situation remained like this until 1995, when the school started to open its doors to any students who could afford the fees. An approximately equal number of boys and girls started enrolling and the school had to construct a new girls' hostel to accommodate the new ratio of one boy to one girl. So, although Phiri says that girls took a relatively lower percentage of places at secondary school and university levels, in some cases the facilities built for them gave girls no choice. Many of the government schools offered even fewer places for girls. In

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<sup>28</sup> Quoted on 21 October 2008. After the May 16 elections, the situation improved for women such that in a cabinet of 43 people, 11 are women – see section 5.7.1 of this dissertation.

the researcher's view that cannot be called "equal opportunities for girls and boys". Phiri did, however, outline that the government took steps to correct the imbalance (1992:28). The imbalance was not only due to girls not taking the opportunity to education; it has also been caused by unequal opportunities to education facilities.

### **3.2.4 A brief history of the Chewa people**

Before the country became colonised, Malawi as a nation did not exist. In its place there were several kingdoms with the Malabvi and Tumbuka Kingdoms being the oldest and the most prominent. These were followed by an inflow of the Yao, Sena, Ngoni, Lomwe, Nkhonde and Tonga tribes between the 1600s and 1800s. They came in from all four directions, with different languages and different systems of politics, society, economy and religion (Phiri 1992:29). The earliest settlers, as shown by history, came as early as 800 C.E. These were of pygmoid origin – people of small stature. They were followed by Bantu settlers, starting from 900 C.E. The first Bantu people, known as the proto-Bantu, were the Banda clan of the present Chewa people. They came through Lake Tanganyika (now Tanzania) (Phiri 1992:29, 30). The second Bantu group, called the Malabvi, came in between 1300 and 1500 C.E. They formed the Malabvi empires and are in Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique. The dominant ruling clan were the Phiris. The Malabvi consisted of the Chewa, Mang'anja, Nyanja, Chipeta, Nsenga, Chikunda, Mbo, Mtumba and Zimba. The Chewa of the central and southern region make up half of the Malawi population and their language became the national language along with English (Phiri 1992:30, 31).

#### **3.2.4.1 Religion among the early Chewa people and women involvement**

##### **i. Clans of the early Chewa people**

The Chewa people are divided into two major groups, namely the Banda clan and the Phiri clan. The Banda clan is also known as the proto-Chewa. Their settlement into the present Malawi is estimated to be around 900–1480 C.E. (Phiri 2000:23). The Banda

clan was part of what was formerly called the Malabvi people (Pachai 1973:6). The Banda clan was not the only proto-Chewa group; there were others, less prominent, living along with the Banda (Schoffeleers 1999:154). The second group is the Phiri clan whose settlement date is estimated to be after 1480 C.E. (Phiri 2000:23). They came from the Congo and entered Malawi through the north-eastern side (Phiri 1992:30). When the Phiri clan arrived, they conquered the Banda clan and the other proto-Chewa groups (Schoffeleers 1999:150). In doing so the Phiri clan became the dominant Chewa clan. However, they settled in areas not previously inhabited and so they appointed their own local and provincial chiefs among the Banda and other proto-Chewa clans (Schoffeleers 1999:154).

According to Schoffeleers (1999:149), the Banda and the Phiri clans were the two most prominent, but from the sixteenth century onwards, rulers of the Chewa were mostly from the Phiri clan.

## **ii. Women's role in religion among the Chewa people**

At the centre of the Chewa religion are the rain shrines, the origin of which caused a number of theories (Van Breugel 2001:44). Crucial to the issues at stake in the dissertation is the fact that women controlled the rain shrines as prophetesses (Phiri 1992:49). When the Phiri clan came into the country, two shrines were developed: one in the southern region of Malawi, based on a man called M'bona and the other in the central region, where the Nkhoma Synod predominantly is. The latter was based on the Supreme Being called *Chisumphu*, but it was headed by a succession of women called *Mangadzi* or *Makewana* (Van Breugel 2001:4; Phiri 1992:50). These women heads of the Chewa religion were regarded as prophetesses (Chisale 2002b:124), who controlled the shrines, received messages from God and disseminated them to the people (Phiri 2000:26). As indicated above, a number of theories have been developed as to the origin of these rain shrines. The most plausible seems to be the one proposed by Schoffeleers. According to him, the rain shrines seem to have been established by the early settlers known as the *Akafulas*. The proto-Chewas, who included the Banda clan, adopted them from the



*Akafulas*, but added to that establishment the office of prophetesses, referred to as the "spirit wives". In the central region, the main rain shrine was at Kaphirintiwa, while in the southern region the major one was at Mt.Thyolo (Schoffeleers 1999:152). When the Phiri clan came into Malawi, they tried to control some shrines, one of which was the Kaphirintiwa shrine. Consequently, the shrine at Kaphirintiwa was presided over by the proto-Chewa religious functionary, a Mbewe priest sometimes referred to as *Chisumphi*, and the Phiri functionary, M'bona. Later, when a dispute ensued between the two functionaries, M'bona, having been accused of sorcery, fled to the south (Schoffeleers 1999:156). Having been a religious leader at Kaphirintiwa, he is likely to have re-affirmed his position in one of the southern region shrines to the extent of being the centre of veneration.

It should be noted that the proto-Chewa believed that there was the Most High God by the name of *Chisumphi* (Schoffeleers 1999:200; Ott 2001:164). The nominal incarnation of *Chisumphi* was the "spirit snake" called Thunga. The "spirit snake", *Thunga*, is called a nominal incarnation because it was regarded as a very limited representation of *Chisumphi*. However, among the proto-Chewa, the rain shrine priests—Mbewe priests—were also regarded as nominal incarnations of *Chisumphi*, hence they were also referred to as *Chisumphi* (Schoffeleers 1999:199). So, among the proto-Chewa, *Chisumphi* was the name of the Most High God, and his nominal incarnation was either in the form of Thunga or the rain shrine priests.

As other scholars, Phiri argues that women took leadership positions among the Chewa society between the period 900 C.E. to 1889 (1992:52). Of special importance is the presence of "spirit wives" at the rain shrines. Schoffeleers states that

A further feature of these shrines were the 'spirit wives', women living in permanent celibacy and set apart for the cult of the godhead. These were ideally or in reality members of the Banda clan, the reputed 'owners of the land.' Their role was mediumistic, and they transmitted messages received in a state of ecstasies (1999:152–153).

The woman's position of leadership, that she was regarded as God's intermediary, telling people messages from God, is noted. However, the fact that she served as a "wife" of God's incarnation in Thunga raises, in the view of the researcher, a few suspicions as to whether the woman was not put there because she was to be a "wife", as argued below. This would imply that the woman was placed in that position out of necessity, since the function of "wife" could only be fulfilled by a woman. That she was believed to be a "wife" to *Chisumphu* incarnated into Thunga, the "spirit snake", in part, if not in whole, explains why the person in a leadership position was a woman. In that case being God's intermediary would come second. As will be seen later, she had to perform some duties which only a woman could do. The idea that she had to be a woman is further strengthened by what, according to Phiri, happened to the shrines in the Lower Shire in the sixteenth century. She points out that the rise of the Lundu dynasty changed the myth and structure of the cult among the Chewas in the Lower Shire. The great male prophet called M'bona replaced the woman prophet at the shrine. After he was slain, he was replaced by a woman called Salima who stayed at the shrine as the wife of M'bona's spirit (Phiri 1992:53). Again the question is: Was a woman in this case chosen because she was regarded as being equally capable as a man or because she was to be the "wife" of M'bona's spirit? Part of her job, it is said, was to cook food every day and wait for the human return of M'bona. Her other role was to disseminate M'bona's messages, which she received in a dream, to the people. According to Phiri this second role was shared by a male official called Kalowantsekela. He also stayed at the shrine (Phiri 1992:54). However, she does not explain why there had to be an additional official, who was male, to disseminate M'bona's messages.

As stated in 3.2.4.2, Chisale is also making an important observation. He seems to say that a woman had to occupy the Chewa religious leader's position not because she was equal in status to man. He says that she occupied that position because by "virtue of her marginal state, she revealed and attracted God's favour". (Chisale 2002b:125)

What Phiri writes about the "spirit wife" of the "spirit snake" in one of the southern region shrines is reiterated by Chisale who writes of the involvement of the "spirit wives" of Chisumphi (God) in all Chewa shrines of the central region, as shown below:

Settlements were centred on rain shrines or sacred pools led by Spirit Wives...In central Malawi, there were five main shrines functioning under a hierarchy...Spirit Wives were the political and spiritual leaders of the shrines. They were responsible for calling rain on behalf of the people, and presided over initiation rites. They were married to *Chisumphi* (God), and outside of some ritual functions, lived in permanent celibacy in the care of their *matsano*, five to eight young female attendants (Chisale 2002a:19).

This indicates that these women ("spirit wives") were an integral part of the shrines and may possibly have been put there because they were believed to be "wives" of *Chisumphi* (God).

To summarise, in the researcher's view the spirit wife had to be a woman for the following reasons. In the case of M'bona's wife, her job was to cook food every day and wait for the human return of M'bona (Phiri 1992:54). In the Chewa culture cooking is a woman's job. She had to have symbolic intercourse with Kamundi, the cult official (Serge 2007:25) at the girls' initiation rite and later Kamundi had to have sexual intercourse with his (Kamundi's) wife (Van Breugel 2001:56). To have symbolic sexual intercourse with a male functionary, she had to be a woman. With God being looked at as male, as is argued below, his "wife" had to be a woman.

Another aspect worth mentioning here is the so-called *matsanos* who were *Makewana's* attendants. Phiri says that because the *matsanos* were said to be the wives of *Makewana*, a woman, the term "wife" in this case does not mean what we know it to be. God was therefore not known to be male on account of him being *Makewana's* "husband", since *Makewana*, a woman, was *matsanos'* "husband". She, moreover, points out that God was known through activities which could not be related to a particular gender (Phiri 1992:55, 56).

It could be true that the relationship between *Makewana* and the *matsanos* may not have been identical with the relationship between husband and wife in the sense that they would not have sexual relations. After all, *matsanos* were not supposed to have sexual intercourse. *Makewana* only had ritual sexual intercourse marking the end of the girls' initiation ceremony (Phiri 1992:63, 64). However, they may have been called "wives" of *Makewana* because of other attributes associated with the husband/wife relationship, such as subordination. The title "wives" may be indicating that they were subordinate to *Makewana*. In fact, Phiri herself says that the Chewa woman was taught the importance of unconditional submission to her husband and that the husband had to be treated as a king (Phiri 2000:40). In *Kukula ndi Mwambo*, a book which talks about Chewa traditional values, a mother advises her daughters in the following manner:

“My daughters! See to it that you always show respect to your husbands. Whatever your husband says should not be challenged because they are like kings to you. Know that we (women) are not on the same status as men. They deserve to be honoured. When you are talking to men, you should know and show that you are subordinate to them because men, even though some may appear small, always have authority over us<sup>29</sup>” (Gwengwe 1998:89).

Phiri points out that both *Makewana* and *matsanos* were in a privileged position as far as religious leadership was concerned. Both slept in special huts. Both were not supposed to cut their hair short. If a *Matsano* was discovered to be having a sexual relationship with one of the functionaries, she could be stopped from being a *Matsano* and the man could be killed (Phiri 1992:63, 64). However, although a *Matsano* as well as *Makewana* were in this privileged position, they were not put there because they were regarded as equal to, or better than men. They were there because these positions could only be occupied, and their accompanying functions only fulfilled by women. Apart from being a "wife" to *Makewana*, one of their jobs was to pound flour for offerings (Phiri 1992:63).

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<sup>29</sup> At the end of the admonition is a Chewa proverb that literally translates to: “A male grasshopper is never small”. The actual meaning is that males will always have authority over women, irrespective of their (men's) size. [Please note that the translation of the passage from Gwengwe's book and the said proverb are both mine].

In the Chewa culture, pounding flour is strictly a female job. In Gwengwe's book *Kukula ndi Mwambo*, which means "growing up in the proper (Chewa) way"<sup>30</sup>, a man teaches his sons and daughters what is expected of them. He says that "*Amuna azikhala kwaokha ku mabwalo, ndiponso akazi kumitondo*" (Gwengwe 1998:63). The translation of the statement is that men must sit in their own chatting place, away from women, and women's place is where they do the pounding<sup>31</sup>. Phiri also talks about *pantondo* as an informal women's forum to discuss women issues (1992:86). In the Chewa girls' initiation ceremony, songs are sung about pounding as a girl's role (Fiedler 2007:25).

In the researcher's view, in the case of *matsanos*, the term "wife" was used to show that the attendants, *matsanos*, were subordinate to *Makewana*. And, in the case of *Makewana*, the supposedly "wife" of God could only be a woman. Although Phiri does not agree with Chakanza that God was among the Chewa regarded as male, there is evidence that may support Chakanza's view. Van Breugel, writing about the concepts of God among the Chewa<sup>32</sup>, says that the name *Leza* indicates that God is caring. When the name *Tate*, that is Father, is used for God, it has the same connotations (Van Breugel 2001:30). This name gives the impression that God was looked upon as male. *Chisumphu*, another name for God, referred to above, shows God's attribute as the Giver of rain (Van Breugel 2001:30). Kawale cites three scholars according to whom the Chewa believes that the rain that fell after the rain-calling ceremony was the semen or urine of the rain god *Chisumphu*. In addition to these scholars, he cites Mbiti and Ritchie who also refer to the fact that, in some African cultures, rain is looked at as semen, urine or spittle of God (Kawale 1998:30). It is, moreover, significant to note that Linden, talking about the Chewa religion, writes: "*Makewana*, the mother of the people, was identified with the male deity...." (1999:202). In a society where God is looked at as male, and where the idea of male marrying male is alien, *Makewana* had to be a woman. Besides, as pointed out above, *Makewana* was supposed to have ritual intercourse with a male court official,

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<sup>30</sup> My translation

<sup>31</sup> My translation

<sup>32</sup> Van Breugel's book *Chewa Traditional Religion* is a revised Doctoral Thesis that he submitted at the University of London. His research was on Chewa's tradition, culture and religion.

Kamundi, marking the end of the girls' initiation rites (Serge 2007:25). To perform these duties she had to be a woman.

However, that these women *makewanas* had power over men cannot be denied. Phiri's argument that women occupied important leadership positions in the Chewa religion is strengthened by a number of other statements she makes. Quoting Rangeley, she points out that the name *Makewana/Mangadzi* became one of the names by which God was known. *Makewana* was also known as *Chauta*, another name used for God among the Chewa. According to Phiri *Makewana/Mangadzi* was the keeper of the shrine and it was believed that she controlled rain. She was responsible for the ceremonies to bring rain and she could also utter prophecies and make divinations. When she died, she was never referred to as having died because God cannot die. She was referred to as having gone to visit God (Phiri 1992:59). Due to her involvement in bringing rain, prophesying and making divinations, *Makewana* was perceived as a nominal incarnation of God, hence her name and that of God (*Chauta*) became interchangeable. *Makewana* had political powers as well. She allotted land. She had the final authority on who could be appointed as chief. It is said that Chadza Phiri and Chadza Kwenda were not confirmed in their chiefdoms until at *Makewana's* word (Van Breugel 2001:45). She even gave them bangles and tails as symbols of their chiefdom. When she travelled, she was carried on the shoulders of a man, as was the case with the other chiefs. *Makewana* had the right of *Mzinda* – a right reserved only for chiefs among the Chewa people (Phiri 1992:65).

Phiri points out that it was not only among the Chewa that a woman (*Makewana*) had political power. She cites the Banda tradition as describing the pre-Malawi chieftainship as based on a female chief or her male substitute either of whom possessed mystical powers (Phiri 1992:66).

During the Phiri period, the Chewa passed on their chieftainship to their sisters' children. Although, according to Phiri, in most cases the position was given to male children, females could be chosen in the absence of male children as long as they had leadership

qualities. Since male heirs were preferred, it seems as if men and women were not really treated as equals as far as choosing a chief is concerned.

It is, however, significant that *Makewana* had the rights of *Mzinda*, rights that were exclusively those of chiefs (Phiri 1992:65). And the Chewa dance called *Nyau*, a dance that is an embodiment of *Mzinda*, was started at *Makewana's* command. She did this after having noticed that the chiefs were not respected. *Nyau* was introduced to instil the respect that the chiefs deserved (Van Breugel 2001:134). This confirms that *Makewana* had political powers, even powers to supervise the welfare of the chief's office.

However, in the researcher's view, *Makewanas* and *matsanos* occupied leadership positions as "wives" of God and *makewana* respectively. Authority over men was only bestowed on them in their capacity as "wives" of important functionaries. Besides, the story of *Makewana* does not provide us with an example of a common woman of her time. She had an elevated position in society and cannot be used as a measuring stick for the status of all women of her time. Therefore, it cannot be said that the Chewa culture favour the idea of women leading men.

#### **3.2.4.2 Changes which led to women losing their religious leadership positions**

The leadership positions described above gave women some influence over men, although this did not necessarily imply that women were considered as equal to men. This influence/leadership was more of an exception; as a rule women generally could not rise above men. However, all of this aside, these leadership positions were lost because of the reasons outlined below.

##### **i. Ngoni raids**

The Ngonis are said to have played a major role in the demise of the rainmaking cult and hence the demise of the *Makewana* office. After the invasion of the patriarchal Ngoni in

the 1870s the rain shrine stopped functioning (Phiri 1992:50). According to Linden (1999:201)

The Mpezeni Ngoni looked with disfavour on a cult which involved their wives in privileged access to powerful alien spirits... Thunga<sup>33</sup> was relegated to the world of the demonic and returned to being a water-spirit.

Attempts to rebuild the shrine proved futile because a number of new sites were proposed and functionaries to the shrine could not reach an agreement where it was to be transferred to in order to be free from Ngoni raids (Schoffeleers 1999:171). The women who came to claim the position of *Makewana* did not pass the test; the Mkumbi village which formerly provided food to the *Makewana* headquarters was no longer there; the coming of Christianity from 1875 onwards preached against traditional religions (Phiri 1992:67). All of this had a tremendous effect on the office of *Makewana*.

## **ii. The coming of Christianity**

The coming of Christianity accelerated the demise of the rainmaking cult (Linden 1999:201). According to Phiri this was the case because the missionaries refused to recognise the leadership positions of women in religion (1992:50). In the researcher's view a more accurate assessment is made by Kawale:

When the DRC missionaries evangelised the Chewa people, they regarded the Chewa culture as fully erroneous and barbaric and they were determined to replace it with the Christian culture.... In this regard, several restrictions, banning the Chewa cultural practices, were made (Kawale 2001:215)<sup>34</sup>.

It appears as if the missionaries wanted to stop the cult, not because they were particularly against *makewana* as a woman religious leader, but because they were

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<sup>33</sup> Thunga was the name of the "spirit snake" that was regarded as god. As pointed out, a woman, known as *makewana*, was provided for him as wife.

<sup>34</sup> To substantiate the statement Kawale cites a few other scholars and *zolanulira*.



against the Chewa religious cult as such and in the process the woman leader was affected.

### iii. The coming of colonial government

When Nyasaland was declared a British protectorate in 1891, the powers of chiefs were reduced and *Makewana* could not function with weakened chiefs (Phiri 1992:67).

### iv. Other factors

In addition to the stated factors that influenced the loss of female leadership, Van Breugel makes the following important statement:

“...most notable development in the last half-century was the adoption by some headmen of the role of the former female rain makers. This we see both at the Bunda Shrine and the Tsang’oma Shrine. The last female makewana died around 1920 at Tsang’oma. In 1948 there was a severe drought and plans were made to elect a new makewana. It was a nephew of the last makewana who was chosen; he was installed on 3<sup>rd</sup> Sept 1955.” (Van Breugel 2001:47)

It has been stated by Phiri that, since the *Makewana* story shows that women in the past occupied the highest positions in the Chewa religion, and that it never occurred to men to question this, the church in the central region of Malawi cannot use cultural reasons to exclude women from leadership positions (1992:68). However, as I argued above, *Makewana* had to be a woman because she was to be the "wife" of god.

In contrast with Phiri, who emphasises the high positions of women in the Chewa religion, Chisale seems to suggest that the *Makewana* (woman) was chosen to be in that position because the woman is considered as weak. He says:

The Chewa tends to associate weakness and infertility with God and the ancestors. A proverb expresses this dimension

well: *Wolumala ndi Chauta, mumpembedze* (the cripple is God, worship him/her). The cripple carries the weakness of his infirmity, a message revealing divine reality. The Spirit Wife's lifestyle expresses a total and constant availability to Chauta and the ancestors call.... Her title as wife of God and mother of children emphasises service. She humbly begged God for the land's fertility for the benefit of her children. By virtue of her marginal state, she revealed and attracted God's favour (Chisale 2002b:125).

At the same time, it is not possible to say for certain that men did not question the authority of *Makewana*. How is it that later on the headmen started usurping *Makewana's* position to make it their own?

#### **3.2.4.3 Women's position in the Chewa matrilineal society examined**

Having focused on women's involvement as *Makewana* in the Chewa religion, it is important to describe their position in the Chewa society as a whole. Apart from situating women in a wider perspective, this will also give access to the world of the common Chewa women.

The Chewa society is matrilineal. This means that the lineage is traced through grand-mothers, mothers, daughters and grand-daughters (Gwengwe 1998:17). The family is the smallest political unit in the Chewa society (Longwe 2007:18), usually headed by a man, who is either an uncle or a brother of the woman (Gwengwe 1998:12). This head of the household is called *Nkhoswe*. The *ankhoswes* are the guardians of the sister (or niece) and her children. He provides for their social, economic and other needs (Phiri 1992:85).

##### **i. Positive aspects of a matrilineal society towards women**

In a matrilineal society the woman was better off than in a patrilineal one in terms of privileges and treatment. She was to some extent protected from an abusive husband, since her husband joined her at her home, which meant that she was surrounded by her blood kinsmen/women. She had the privilege of being the base or *tsinde* of the lineage

(Phiri 1992:69). The woman had the ownership of children and she could remarry after divorce or widowhood. She could inherit land from her parents (mother). Because there was no bride price paid by the husband, the Chewa woman enjoyed the freedom of not being regarded as property (Phiri 1992:71). Although a woman is normally not chosen to be the chief or leader of the village, elderly women are consulted and have an input in who is to be the chief (Longwe 2007:18). In an interview with some elderly men, they pointed out that elderly women of the village are still called *makewanas*, although not in precisely the same sense as the wife of the spirit snake. These elderly women are consulted on important matters and their word is usually respected<sup>35</sup>.

## ii. Negative aspects of a matrilineal society towards women

Although the Chewa society was matrilineal in nature, it was still patriarchal in practice. The Chewa woman suffered humiliation if she failed to bear children. It did not matter whether it was she who was barren or her husband – she was the one to blame (Phiri 1992:71). Women could not remain single, even if they wanted to do so. Although men were also expected to marry, being a single woman implied more serious humiliation. According to Phiri women were prepared for a life with men at a very early age (1992:72, 73). The woman was also taught unconditional submission to her husband, and to treat him as a king (Gwengwe 1998:89). Even in extreme cases of abuse by their husbands, some women failed to speak about this. During the initiation ceremony, girls were forced to have sex with unknown men called *afisi* (Gwengwe 1998:84; Phiri 1992:75). On major decisions which concerned them, women were still dependent on their brothers and uncles, the so-called *ankhoswe* (Phiri 1992:68), whose decision was final (Gwengwe 1998:14). There were also cases, as Phiri states, where women were oppressed by fellow women. An example of this was when a woman failed to, or chose not to send her daughter to *chisamba*<sup>36</sup>. Phiri quotes Maliwa who says that in olden days children born

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<sup>35</sup> Interview with Charles Thunga, regional secretary of Chewa society and a long time adviser to one of the prominent Chewa chiefs.

<sup>36</sup> *Chisamba* was an initiation ceremony pregnant women had to go through.

of a woman who had not undergone *chisamba* could be buried alive by the *nankungwis*<sup>37</sup> (1992:77). It is evident that the woman in a matrilineal society was still oppressed by men. In this regard Phiri says that the freedom that the woman in the Chewa society enjoyed was a limited one. She was regarded as less important compared to men. Such sentiments are expressed even in Chewa proverbs such as “*Mphongo ya chiwala sichepa*”<sup>38</sup> (Gwengwe 1998:89), and “*Masewera anabala mwana*” (Chakanza 2000:173)<sup>39</sup>. However, among the Chewa a mother is generally appreciated more than a father, as shown in the number of proverbs that refer to the goodness of a mother compared to those that talk about the goodness of a father. In his book, *Wisdom of the People*, in which he outlined two thousand Chinyanja (Chewa) proverbs, Chakanza cited proverbs that talk about the importance of parenthood in thirteen places. Out of these thirteen, twelve are exclusively about the honour given to a mother, while only one talks about both mothers and fathers (Chakanza 2000:21, 25, 66, 87, 90, 104,111, 114,151, 168,227, 254, 338).

Because of the circumstances described above, Phiri is perhaps justified in saying that the matrilineal system among the Chewa did not accord the Chewa woman the expected advantage which should come with the privilege of the woman remaining with her kinspeople even after marriage. Although she had a few privileges, she was subjected to early marriages, forced sexual intercourse due to following some rituals, and she was feared because of her menstrual blood. She could be married to a polygamous man, and if she remained single it would be abnormal. Barren women suffered degradation. Thus in reality, even in a matrilineal system the woman is not free, but under the control of either her uncle or brother (Phiri 1992:50, 51). Even though she owns the children of her marriage, the one who really controls her family and children is the uncle. However, the relationship is two-way in that the woman’s sons and daughters are the heirs to the

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<sup>37</sup> *Nankungwis* were women responsible for organizing and teaching at *chisamba* and other women’s ceremonies.

<sup>38</sup> The proverb literally translates to “A male grasshopper is never small”, which means that any male will have more authority than a woman. [My translation]

<sup>39</sup> The traditional Chewa proverb says “*Masewera anabala mwana wamphongo*”, meaning that when a girl and a boy say that they are just playing, the not-so-serious exercise may result in serious consequences, [my translation] that is, bearing a male child – implying that bearing a male child is a more serious business and more valuable than bearing a female child.

uncle's wealth and throne, not the uncle's children as is the case in a patrilineal system (Gwengwe 1998:17). To some extent the woman, as a beneficiary of the matrilineal system, therefore gets a bigger share. Besides, she enjoys greater honour in the family than the man does.

#### **3.2.4.4 Transformation of the Chewa women's image**

With time the image of the Chewa woman in the home and in society changed both negatively and positively. That there is no longer a woman *makewana* to lead the people in Chewa religious rain shrines is one obvious manifestation that the position of the Chewa woman has changed. Phiri mentions three factors that contributed towards changes in the image of the Chewa women. These factors are the coming of slave women, the coming of patriarchal societies and the coming of Christianity.

##### **i. Negative transformation**

##### **Slave women.**

Slavery among the Chewa people started as early as 1810. It is not clear where exactly slave women among the Chewa people first came from. Yao chiefs were infamous as slave traders. Prominent Yao chiefs who traded in slaves were Zerafi, Makanjira, Kapeni and Kawinga (Kamwaza 2007:40). They acted as middle men who either bought or captured slaves and sold them to European or Arab slave dealers who lived in coastal towns (Chiunguzeni 2006:113). Although slave trade was at first only associated with the Yao tribe, this was soon emulated by indigenous people, and they too flourished in the trade (Kamwaza 2007:46). The majority of the indigenous people of Malawi were Chewa (cf. section 3.2.4). As it was the custom that local chiefs either captured slaves or bought them from other tribes and kept them in readiness for the coming of slave buyers (Chiunguzeni 2006:114), the Chewas must have married some of the women slaves they captured or bought. Africa lost people through the Atlantic slave trade on the west coast and the Arab slave trade on the east coast. Long after the Atlantic slave trade was stopped because of the anti-slavery measures taken by Europe, slave trading in Africa continued,

since some slaves were still sold to Arabs (Bottaro et al 2005:65, 66). Chiunguzeni states that despite the end of slave trade in Zanzibar, some African chiefs and Arab–Swahili agents continued to capture slaves in the interior of Africa (2006:116). This could mean that some slaves who were already captured were not sold to distant lands, but remained as slaves of the chiefs who captured them. Another thing which confirms that the Chewas were affected by slave trade in one way or the other, is the fact that slaves were captured from Nkhotakota and the interior of Malawi all the way across to Zambia (Kamwaza 2007:39). This means that the Chewa land was completely involved in slave trade, since Zambia is further to the interior of Africa and to get to Zambia from the eastern coast, one has to cross Malawi. Writing about trade among the Chewa people of Malawi and the people of Zambia, Rafael (1980:24) lists items that the Chewa people were offering in exchange for hoes, salt and clothes, namely goats and slaves. Of particular importance are the following statements:

For one slave girl six bags of salt were given. For a boy, however, only five such bags. For adult slaves they paid twelve hoes and an axe, when it was a woman, and ten hoes or ten cotton clothes for a man (Rafael 1980:24).

The same writer mentions that chiefs from other tribes sold women at a cheaper price than men (1980:22). So the Chewas apparently attached more importance to women slaves than to men slaves.

According to Rafael the Chewas were unlike the Yaos in the sense that they (the Chewas) mainly acted as producers and not as middle men (1980:24). They sold people they already had and did not buy people with the aim of selling them at a profit. However, the use of the word “mainly” implies that there were still some Chewas who were middle men, although not to the same extent as the Yaos. So it is possible that these Chewas bought some women slaves, sold some of these to Europeans or Arabs, and kept some for themselves to marry.

Slave women were unconditionally submissive to their husbands and in cases of polygamy, where a slave was one of the wives, the husband preferred the slave wife because of her unconditional submission. Chewa women had to compete with slave wives for the same husband. So it occurred to Chewa women that if they were to remain married, they had to be slaves to their husbands as well (Phiri 1992:87). One wonders why women could not marry male slaves to experience some obedience from such husbands as well. During slavery days this was not unique to Chewa people. Even in the United States of America, while some states passed laws which prohibited interracial marriages (Ashimolowo 2007:129, 132, 134, 135), in other states a marriage between a white man and a black woman was seemingly not considered as a crime. In such states the laws only forbade white women marrying black men (Ashimolowo 2007: 128, 134). Since men were expected to have authority over women, the idea that a man of the supposedly subordinate race/group could have authority over a woman of the supposedly higher race/group was repulsive. The important point here is that, during the time of slavery, the Chewa woman was forced to be submissive to her husband because husbands started preferring slave women as a result of their unconditional submissiveness.

**Foreign patrilineal societies.** Another factor which affected the Chewa women is the advent of foreign patrilineal societies, particularly the Swahili from the East Coast, who settled in Nkhosha in the 1840s, the Chikundas from Mozambique who came as ivory traders and the Ngonis who defeated the Chewa of Dedza and Dowa. These tribes all followed a patrilineal system, which may have contributed to changing the image of the Chewa woman (Phiri 1992:88, 89). It has not been explained exactly how these tribes influenced the change. However, one can imagine that inter-marriages were inevitable, which would imply that matrilineal and patrilineal principles had to be compromised for the marriages to work. Hence, to varying degrees, the Chewa woman was subjected to patriarchal tendencies, which are in patrilineal societies more pronounced.

**Christianity.** Christianity seems to have been an influential factor as far as changing the image of Chewa women is concerned. Apart from its positive influence, the Church perpetuated patriarchal theology, which was drawn from an uncritical reading of the

Scriptures. By making use of some biblical texts, the church marginalised all women, pushing them to the periphery of church administration. The Dutch Reformed Church Mission, moreover, condemned the practice of rainmaking. In doing so, they indirectly played a vital role in the demise of the rainmaking cult and in the abolition of the *Makewana* office, hence terminating this important female influence over men (Phiri 1992:94,95).

Apart from losing leadership positions due to the condemnation of the rainmaking cult, women were not allowed to be leaders in the Christian Church since, according to the Nkhoma Synod, subordination of women was divinely sanctioned. The passages used by the Nkhoma Synod are Genesis 3:16, 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, 1 Corinthians 11:7–10 and I Timothy 2:11–14 (Phiri 1992:94, 95). Women were, so to speak, attacked from two sides. Firstly, the office of *Makewana* was abolished because, apart from the factors mentioned above, Christianity looked at all Chewa religious practices as evil. Secondly, the Christian church left women out of leadership positions because the Scriptures said so.

As said in chapter 1, as early as 1951 the Livingstonia Synod already had 270 women as elders and 316 female deacons. This was not the case with the Nkhoma Synod (Phiri 1992:96). However, as stated in chapter 1, Manda points out that:

The ordination of women to the diaconate and eldership within the church in Livingstonia Synod resulted from the fact that a large number of men had gone to join the First and the Second World Wars (1914–1918 and 1939–1945). Others had gone to work in mines and farms either in Tanganyika, the North- and South- Rhodesia (Zambia and Zimbabwe) and South Africa. Such an exodus had resulted in a vast drain of men.... In order to keep the church running some areas sought permission to have some capable women identified and ordained as deacons and others as elders.... There seems to have been no theological motivation behind such a move, but it was out of the expediency and in response to the leadership vacuum.... The ordination of



women to these church offices has continued ever since  
(Manda 2001:242)<sup>40</sup>

This raises an important question: How come that the Nkhoma Synod did not react in a similar way? Was this problem unique to the Livingstonia Synod (and Blantyre Synod)? Part of the answer to the first question is probably that from its inception the Nkhoma Synod took a more conservative stand than the others (cf. 1.3). With regard to the second one, there were various reasons why not many people in the Nkhoma Synod area went to look for jobs in other countries or went to war. The establishment of the Overtoun Institute by the Livingstonia Synod, to which the Nkhoma Synod sent their best students, and the Henry Henderson Institute by the Blantyre Synod (Phiri 1992:33, 34), and perhaps of equal importance, the lack of such schools in the Nkhoma Synod, probably made a difference in the way the members of these synods were equipped to take on the world beyond the national boundaries. Moreover, restrictions like the hut tax, imposed by the British Government on Africans, which made people migrate to neighbouring countries to look for jobs, were opposed by the Nkhoma Synod. People in the Nkhoma synod area were protected from paying the hut tax and from being enlisted in the British army (Phiri 1992:40; Weller & Linden 1984: 33, 40, 44). This could explain why there was an exodus of men in the Livingstonia Synod, and hence the leadership vacuum accounting for the inclusion of women in deaconship and eldership, while this did not happen in the Nkhoma synod.

## ii. Positive transformation

The status of women was changed for the better because the church liberated them from a number of dehumanising practices done in the name of tradition. This includes the banning of initiation ceremonies, whereby young girls were liberated from forced sexual relations with the *afisis*. However, the banning created a problem in that the Church did not put in place a substitute for the banned initiation ceremonies. Consequently, some Christians secretly sent their daughters to initiation ceremonies. In the 1930s, the Church eventually had to compromise, accepting a Christianised *Chinamwali* which they called

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<sup>40</sup> As a matter of observation: Manda does not cite any source as a basis for his statement.

*Chilangizi*, although at first the Church resisted it, regarding it as compromising with sin (Phiri 1992:107–110).

The Church also initiated the banning of bride wealth paid to the bride's matrilineal uncle, which they regarded as dehumanizing. The fact that the Church later, in 1962, reinstated this, causes Phiri to conclude that the banning had nothing to do with liberating women. If the system were dehumanizing, would it stop to be dehumanizing in 1962? In Phiri's view the reinstating suited the men who controlled the administration of the Church (1992:122–125). However, the men who were in administration were the church elders, and therefore already married (Mwale 1979:8). Therefore reinstating the bride wealth was not in order to gain advantage.

Another area of liberation was the abolition of child marriages. Again Phiri thinks that this had nothing to do with the liberation of women. According to her the church simply transferred their western culture to the Chewa society (Phiri 1992:125, 126, 127). In the researcher's view it is difficult to assess whether the Church simply transferred its western culture, or whether it was done with the aim of liberating the girl child. Phiri also mentions that when the church put in place a ruling that no one should give his/her daughter in marriage before the age of seventeen, there was a lot of resistance. She suggests that the reason for this resistance was that parents were afraid that their daughters would become pregnant before marriage. This would not only call for the excommunication of the girls involved, but their parents as well. She points out that the ruling of excommunicating the parents as well stands to this day – meaning to the time of her writing the thesis. However, the church no longer excommunicates the parents on account of their daughter becoming pregnant<sup>41</sup>. In *Zolamulira*, which was printed in 1970, twenty years before Phiri wrote her thesis, it is stated that a mother whose daughter is pregnant needs support of the *alangizi*, even if the daughter is not a Christian (The Nkhoma Synod 1970:13). However, parents who give their daughter in marriage before the daughter reaches puberty, are to be punished (The Nkhoma Synod 1970:124).

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<sup>41</sup> An interview with Dr. W.R. Kawale, general secretary of the Nkhoma Synod from 2002 to 2008.

The banning of polygamy brought women blessings as well as hardships. A polygamous man who became a Christian retained his first wife, but had to divorce the other wives. While women who were first wives were liberated from the hardships of competing for the same man, those who were not first wives and were divorced suffered economic hardship (Phiri 1992:131,132). On widowhood and remarriage, Phiri states that the Church helped to shorten the time the widow had to remain in isolation, not out of good will for the widow, but for the sake of maintaining the Church fellowship. They were afraid of losing members (Phiri 1992:136). The statement in *Zolamulira* cited by Phiri reads:

It is not at all good for a church member who has lost a spouse to be kept away for a long time from worshipping with others. We plead with those who practice this not to do it (The Nkhoma Synod 1970:140)

Firstly, it is not stated that the one who has lost a spouse is specifically a woman – the ruling caters for both men and women. That Phiri regards it as a ruling specific to women is not a correct representation of what was said. Secondly, there is no reference to the church losing members. Just as Phiri construes the reason to be fear of losing members, one could also construe that their fear was genuinely in the interest of the widow's (according to Phiri) or widow's and widower's (according to what has been stated in *Zolamulira*) welfare. Thirdly, the church did not make a ruling. It made a suggestion and pleaded with the community to take that advice. However, Phiri's presentation about stopping property grabbing by the relatives of the deceased, urging men to write a will and stopping levirate marriages unless the man was single and the widow agreed to the marriage, is a true reflection of what is cited in *Zolamulira*.

### **3.3 PHIRI'S FINDINGS ON ATTITUDES TOWARDS WOMEN IN THE NKHOMA SYNOD AND THE POSITIONS WOMEN HAVE OCCUPIED**

As stated in 1.5, Phiri is the only scholar who worked on the subject dealt with in this dissertation. It is therefore important to elaborate somewhat on her findings. Phiri's

findings are given in this chapter in order to show how the Nkhoma Synod's attitudes towards women compare with those of the Chewa society. Later, in chapter 5, these findings will be compared to my own findings.

In her survey on women involvement in the Nkhoma Synod, Phiri considered four areas. These areas are women in church leadership, women in theological education with Mary Chinkhwita as a case study, women in *Chigwirizano cha Amai* and lastly women in church and culture. In all these areas, the attitudes of men and women towards women were in focus (1992:196). What I would like my research to focus on, however, are specifically the attitudes of men and women towards women becoming deacons, church elders and church ministers.

On church leadership, Phiri considered the areas of a deacon, church elder and church minister together, except in rare cases when she separated that of deacon on the one hand, and those of church elder and church minister on the other (1992:200).

### **3.3.1 Church tradition and conservative theology**

Out of the twenty men Phiri interviewed on the issue of women participating in church leadership positions, eighteen gave a negative response. Out of the eighteen, four based their response on church tradition and conservative theology, saying that it started with the missionaries, with the synod simply following that example. The following paragraph is, according to Phiri, representative of this view:

“In the C.C.A.P., Nkhoma Synod has always followed a conservative theology in everything. In this way we protect the church’s reputation. Examples from other synods that have taken a liberal stand by sending women for theological training and having women working in the church have not been encouraging either. There is the example of a woman from one synod who after finishing her studies, started working at the synod’s office and twice got involved in relationships with married ministers working with her. These stories have brought constant fear in the Nkhoma

synod that the presence of women in leadership positions will be a constant temptation to men. Many will lose their faith” (Phiri 1992:197)

While Phiri says that the interviewees’ reasoning is based on church tradition and conservative theology, it is also related on the precedence set by other churches. Since, in other synods, churches did not fare well in trying to integrate women in some way, the Nkhoma Synod saw that as a lesson to learn from the mistake of others. Although this section is about women in church leadership positions, part of the quotation above is about something slightly different. It refers to women having theological and some unspecified training and some woman working in some synod office. Whether her position was in leadership is not stated. This is crucial in the sense that if the woman was not in the same leadership position as men, male ministers might have taken advantage of her subordinate position.

### **3.3.2 Prejudice**

In Phiri’s research three out of eighteen men did not want women in leadership positions just because they were prejudiced against women. They looked at women as short tempered, while men are looked at as patient. Besides, they questioned how a woman would minister when she is pregnant. Phiri relates the fear of men to be ministered by a pregnant woman to *makewana’s* and *matsano’s* cases – that they were not supposed to bear children as long as they held their religious positions. She also cites Old Testament practices in Leviticus 12 (1992:198, 199).

### **3.3.3 Biblical reasons**

The total number of those who used biblical reasons for not allowing women to take any leadership positions was five. Some, using 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 and I Timothy 2:11–12, said women can be deacons but not elders or ministers. Others used the required subjection of a wife to a husband as a reason against women in leadership positions. According to her the group which used biblical reasons can be divided into two

categories. One category comprises of fundamentalists who take the Bible as transcending time and culture. The other category looks at the Bible for examples of women in leadership positions, and of women not allowed to partake in these (Phiri 1992:199, 200).

### **3.3.4 Cultural reasons**

Six of the eighteen men used cultural reasons against women in leadership positions, citing statements such as “Our culture does not allow a woman to rule over a man”. It is also said that the woman’s place is the home, giving birth to and rearing children (Phiri 1992:201, 202).

### **3.3.5 Responses from men and women compared**

#### **3.3.5.1 Negative response from women**

Only two out of the twenty women interviewed by Phiri were of the opinion that women should not take up leadership positions in the church. Their reasoning was similar to men’s. Their responses mainly reflected the impact of patriarchal teachings on women (Phiri 1992:203). Phiri does not state any other factors which may have influenced their decision.

#### **3.3.5.2 Positive response from men**

Two out of the twenty men interviewed supported the idea of having women in leadership positions in the church, stating that some women have good qualities of leadership and counselling, which can benefit the church. In their view the will of God does not exclude women from leadership positions in the church (Phiri 1992:204). It would be helpful if Phiri mentioned to which class of people these men belonged, that is, whether they were from urban or rural areas, and what type of education they had. This would help to detect which factors contribute towards the tendency to include women in leadership. It would also be helpful to state whether the men in question were from a matriarchal or patriarchal teachings on women.

### **3.3.5.3 Positive response from women**

Eighteen of the twenty women interviewed by Phiri supported the idea of including women in leadership positions. Some of the women interviewed stated that they have had exposure to the situation in other synods that have allowed women leaders (Phiri, 1992:205, 206).

In the evaluation of the responses, Phiri mentions that the number of women who supported the idea of including women in leadership positions was exactly equal to the number of men who were against it. This prompted her to say that, if women were present at synod meetings, they would influence the decision (Phiri 1992:207).

### **3.3.6 Phiri's concluding remarks and my point of departure**

In the last chapter of her thesis, Phiri, first, gives a summary of what is discussed in her thesis (1992:269–275). She then addresses the problem of using a fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible as a basis for denying women taking up leadership positions in the church as their male counterparts do (1992:275, 276). It is stated that, although ministers try to interpret the passages that affect women involvement critically, they are influenced by prejudices against women. Lay men, on the other hand, make use of literal interpretation. Both these interpretations have affected women's positions (Phiri 1992:276, 277).

Phiri stressed the need to read the Bible from a woman's perspective, where some of the material in the Bible is looked at as divine message and the other as historical–cultural material (1992:281). In doing so, she referred to the work of a number of feminist biblical scholars and theologians. She cited Rosemary Radford Ruether, who emphasises that any biblical text that denies women full humanity should not be regarded as authoritative; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, who advocates not only the liberation of women, but also of the Bible from patriarchy and androcentric tendencies; and Phyllis Trible, who looks for biblical texts which are against oppression of women. She also

referred to Letty Russell who suggests that any text which does not liberate creation, including women, should be regarded as not authoritative, and to Dorothee Sölle, who reads the Bible looking for the God of justice (1992:283, 284, 285, 286, 287).

All Phiri's citations are feminist interpreters with slight variations from one another. Taking their work into account, the researcher suggests two things. The first one is that other types of interpretations should be considered and their merits and demerits looked into. The second is that influential biblical texts have to receive a thorough interpretation – something I have done with the two passages I have chosen.

On the matter of African women writing about their plight, Phiri quotes Amba Oduyoye, who struggles between rejection of the Bible because of its patriarchal and ethnocentric presuppositions and embracing it because it belongs to a community she cannot do without. She also quotes Musimbi Kanyoro who says that for women to rise above the denial of freedom as proposed in the Bible, they need to dig out women participation in the texts, although the surface of the texts do not show their participation. The culture in which the Bible was written is also to be considered. Since Phiri says that we do not find adequate literature written by African women about themselves, a helpful suggestion may be that the church together with the rest of the para-church Christian community should ensure that women are given opportunities and encouragement to write about themselves.

Phiri says that some of the New Testament texts which are used against women partaking in leadership make use of the creation stories of Genesis. She laments that these New Testament texts are misinterpretations of the creation stories. One creation story comprises Genesis 1–2:4a and the other 2:4b–3:24. According to her the first story does not marginalise women (1992:291, 191). It is the second creation story, which reflects the patriarchal culture of the time, that is used to marginalise women. Unfortunately Phiri does not justify her reasoning in greater detail.



In her concluding remarks, Phiri calls on the Nkhoma Synod to reconsider the plight of women in the church by admitting them to leadership positions along with their male counterparts. The Nkhoma Synod, operating on a Reformed theological tradition, should realise that the whole reformation came about through the search of Scripture. They should, therefore, search the same Scripture regarding the stand of women in the synod. She pleads that women should be allowed to go for higher theological training as men do (Phiri 1992:305).

### 3.4 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have seen that although Malawi has slightly more women than men, women have not enjoyed a fair share of the resources. For every one illiterate man, there are approximately two illiterate women. Girls have had less educational opportunities than boys. Although *Makewana* had an elevated religious position among the Chewa people, her position was out of necessity – not because she was considered equal to men. Besides, her elevated position was an exception rather than a rule.

Over the years there have been more negative changes to the status of women than positive ones. Consequently the already low positioned woman had even the little esteem she enjoyed taken away from her. Christianity brought with it a few things that were to the woman's advantage, but the disadvantages brought by Christianity outweighed the advantages. The Chewa matrilineal system gave the woman some importance only in a limited way. Although she is regarded as the root of the lineage, she is still under the control of a *Nkhoswe*, who is male.

Phiri's research on the possibility of women becoming leaders in the Nkhoma Synod shows that 90% of men interviewed would not allow women to be leaders, while only 10% of women interviewed shared this view. A small proportion of men gave biblical reasons as a basis for stopping women to be leaders. The majority of men based their refusal to include women in leadership on prejudice, church tradition and conservative theology and cultural reasons.

Throughout the years, men seem to have been in the driving seat and are doing everything possible to keep women under their control.

## CHAPTER 4

### Crucial Pauline passages on women

#### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on two Pauline passages which deal with women participation in church gatherings. These two texts are 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 and 14:34–35. 1 Timothy 2: 9–15, which has been, like these texts, extremely influential with regard to the position of women in the Christian churches, is not discussed here, since it is nowadays commonly regarded as deuterio–Pauline. It has, moreover, already been dealt with by Phiri (1992). Before discussing these texts, elements in each of them are highlighted which in the researcher's view had and still have a negative effect on women participation in the Church.

1 Corinthians 11:2–16 in conjunction with I Corinthians 14:34–35 are probably the most frequently quoted Pauline texts in connection with women participation in church gatherings. These two passages are often contrasted by scholars and, on the basis of their seemingly opposing views on women in church public gatherings, the idea that they were written by the same person, Paul, is sometimes questioned. Much of the work that has been done on these passages are attempts to explain this perceived tension.

In considering these passages, and discussing the views of a number of scholars, the following issues will receive attention: the position of women in the first–century world, possible contexts for the letter as a whole and for the specific section (I Cor. 11–14), terms like “head” and “head covering” (11:3–7, 10, 13), what prophecy (1 Cor. 11:4,5) and “speak” ( 1 Cor. 14:34) refer to, a possible contradiction in 1 Corinthians 11 between verses 3 and 7–10, where Paul seems to be condoning the subordination of women, and verses 11–12, which is interpreted by some as pointing to the equality of men and women (cf. Martin 1995:229), and 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 as a possible interpolation. One of the questions when approaching these texts is whether Paul is subscribing to the hierarchical

structures of his time, with men regarded as superior to women, or whether he is moving away from these, as some interpreters think.

Having paid attention to the position of women in the then world, an overview will be provided of scholars' interpretations of the two passages, and specific matters in them. This is not a comprehensive survey; it focuses on a few crucial issues which usually receive attention when these passages are interpreted, and which are of interest for the topic at stake in the dissertation. In doing so attention is also paid to the contexts of the first century in which these passages are embedded and with which they may cohere.

The focus of the dissertation is on the possible effect of Pauline texts on the position of women in the Christian churches, with C.C.A.P Nkhoma Synod as the case study. The discussion will, therefore, be compared and contrasted to the C.C.A.P. Nkhoma Synod context.

## **4.2 1 CORINTHIANS 11:2-16 AND 14: 34-35: INTRODUCTORY REMARKS**

### **4.2.1 1 Corinthians 11:2–16**

1 Corinthians 11:2–16 read

“Now I praise you brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions as I delivered them to you. But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. Every man praying or prophesying having his head covered dishonours his head. But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head, for that is one and the same as if her head were shaved. For if a woman is not covered, let her also be shorn. But if it is shameful for a woman to be shorn or shaved, let her be covered. For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man is not from woman, but woman from man. Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man. For this reason a woman ought to have a symbol of authority

on her head, because of the angels. Nevertheless, neither is man independent of woman, nor woman independent of man, in the Lord. For as the woman was from man, even so the man also is through the woman; but all things are from God. Judge among yourselves. Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonour to him? But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her; for her hair is given to her for a covering. But if anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God.”<sup>42</sup>

1 Corinthians 11:2–16 have the following statements which seem to have a negative influence on the way women are perceived:

**Verse 3** “...the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man...”

**Verses 7–9** “For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. For man is not from woman, but woman from man. Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man.”

The passage generally presents the status of women as lower than that of men and thus would affect the decision of whether or not some women should have authority over some men by being deacons, church elders or church ministers.

#### **4.2.2 1 Corinthians 14:34–35**

1 Corinthians 14:34–35 read:

“Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says. And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.”

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<sup>42</sup> All Bible quotations from NKJV unless otherwise stated.

1 Corinthians 14:34–35, directly applied to a present–day situation, would imply that women would not be allowed as church elders or ministers, since their job description is to teach/preach in church.

The two passages seem to contradict each other in the sense that in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 it is presupposed that women are prophesying and praying, though with some restrictions, while 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 forbids women to speak in public all together. However, these passages both seem to serve the purpose of excluding women from full participation in the church. In the following pages critical and uncritical or less critical interpretations of the selected Pauline passages by various scholars are explored. This is one of the differences between Phiri's thesis and my dissertation. Before this is done, a look is taken at the position of women in the first-century world.

### **4.3 THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN THE FIRST–CENTURY WORLD**

Paul's first–century world comprised of three cultures, the Jewish, the Greek and the Roman cultures. Since these three cultures might have influenced Paul's perception of women and hence the way he addressed them in the two texts in question, it is crucial that these cultures' perception of women be discussed.

#### **4.3.1 The Jewish image of women**

Jewish society, being highly patriarchal, held women in extremely low esteem. Women could not inherit property from their fathers. Before marriage they were their fathers' property and once married, that of their husbands (Kraemer 1999:35, 36, 38). They were given in marriage without their consent (Tenney 1987:624) and could not initiate divorce proceedings (Kraemer 1999:36). Under Mosaic Law the woman was regarded as the husband's property, just like his children and animals. The role of a wife was always that of serving, and promoting the husband's interests. He was the decision–maker, her master and she had to obey him (Tenney 1987:626). Laws about chastity only served the

interests of men. For example, a man could only be punished for adultery if he slept with someone's wife (Sawyer 1996:39).

In communal religious life, women were not really present. They could not be counted to make a quorum for communal prayer. No woman is known who served as a priest (Kraemer 1999:36, 63). In the Jerusalem temple, women had to sit away from the sacrificial activities. Although they bore the responsibility of religious education in the home, for most of them that was the only area of religious influence (Sawyer 1996:73).

Jewish women were veiled whenever they went in public (Kraemer 1999:36). They were confined to their homes, preserving and preparing food, making clothes for the family and bathing and anointing men (Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:379). Women's association with the Essenes was only as wives and children, and not on the basis of female membership. Pharisees and Sadducees were all male (Kraemer 1999:67,68,69). Although some scholars have interpreted the word "follow" (*akolouthein*), which the Gospel of Mark uses to mean a close following of Jesus by women and consequently as discipleship (Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:379), out of the twelve disciples of Jesus, there was no woman. Although the problem of limitations of a female to closely associate with Jesus and the male disciples comes as a mitigating factor, they could have found a way out, if it were not for the tendency to discriminate against women. It is true that some women who followed Jesus were not named in connection with men, for example Mary Magdalene (Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:181, 182), but most of them had problems or were socially stigmatised. They were either unmarried, widowed, unnamed whom men could pay for sex, demon possessed, stricken by chronic diseases, or mothers with disease stricken children (Kraemer 1999:45). Many scholars are of the opinion that women were marginalised even after the resurrection of Jesus, despite the suggestion by others that the situation had then changed for the better.

### 4.3.2 The Greek image of women

Greek women were also looked down upon by men, although the upper class women enjoyed a bit more respect than those in the lower class. The upper stratum women sometimes acted as advisers to their husbands and sons. In so doing they would influence them in making decisions. They sometimes appeared in public with them, participated in political discussions and probably even took part in conspiracies. These women sometimes helped their husbands or other men to campaign in political elections (Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:368). Besides, rich women were celebrated in the city-states as benefactors and honoured with political functions and titles. However, they did not have real participation in the administration of the city and they could not vote in the popular assembly. Even Hellenistic queens did not have powers independent of men (Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:366). Greek women in the lower stratum were expected to remain within the domestic sphere, under the control of husbands and fathers (Sawyer 1996:54). A woman was not allowed to defend herself in court. In the first century CE, Gaia Afrania, the wife of Senator Licinius Buccio, defended herself in court. Her name became a proverb for a woman with low morals (Lefkowitz & Fant 1988:206). In the Greek world there was contempt for the bodies of women. Galen<sup>43</sup> said that females, by virtue of the way their bodies are made, are less perfect than males (Lefkowitz & Fant 1988:215, 216). There was a slight difference between Sparta and Athens. While in Athens girls, like their mothers, were secluded and would have no share in the education given to boys, in Sparta girls took part in athletic events to make sure that future mothers of Spartan warriors are fit (Jenkins 1986:36). This attitude of Spartans towards girls may have influenced the participation of girls in other sporting events. For example, there is evidence that around Jesus' and Paul's time, women took part in Isthmian Games<sup>44</sup>. The evidence is provided by an inscription from Delphi, where daughters of a certain Pythian, Apollo, won some of the races. Tryphosa won the 200 meters race at the Isthmian Games,

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<sup>43</sup> Galen was born in the second century CE, and was educated in Pergamum, the great Hellenistic seat of learning in Asia Minor. He was a philosopher and a physician.

<sup>44</sup> Isthmian games were sacred games among the Greeks which were observed in Corinth (Lemprieres 1978:302). Although Athens patronized the Isthmian games (Hammond & Scullard 1979:556), by Paul's time Greece was under the Romans, so most likely Sparta had an influence on these games, hence the participation by women.



while Hedeia was the winner of the race for war-chariots at the Isthmian Games. This was around 43 CE (Murphy-O'Connor 1987:26). However, although Spartan girls were given relatively more freedom compared to those in Athens, they were still marginalized.

### **4.3.3 The Roman perspective on women**

According to some scholars Roman women were accorded a greater degree of liberty, compared to Greeks and Jews. However, this liberty was still within the confines of a patriarchal structure (Sawyer 1996:31).

At an early stage, daughters were given the same opportunity to education as sons, but as they approached adulthood, a sharp distinction was made (Sawyer 1996:22). Ancient Roman goddesses and elite women shared the same traits and activities as men. However, the fact that women received less literary coverage than men shows that they were marginalised by the writers of the day (Hallett 1999:32). The elite women status only served to distinguish upper class from lower class, and these elite women did not pursue independent careers which would enable them to make money independent of men (Hallett 1999:32, 33). Roman males had more legal and political rights than females. For example, females could not vote, hold public offices, serve in the army and be rulers. These opportunities were open only to men (Hallett 1999:19). Women could not be senators, equestrians<sup>45</sup>, decurions<sup>46</sup>, judges or even hold some lower positions (Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:365). Although some women accompanied their husbands to public banquets, they had to leave the function before the part of it “which was devoted to drinking, conversation,...philosophical discussion”...and “erotic aspects”(Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:370). Only prostitutes or hetaerae would stay on (Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:371). It is true that the Vestal Virgins had a great deal of freedom, but they were disempowered in attributes of women and were empowered as men. They were given the privileges of elite men, but they served the interests of men.

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<sup>45</sup> Equestrians were some prominent citizens of the knightly order in ancient Rome (Jacobs 2001:347)

<sup>46</sup> Decurions were commanders or captains of ten men usually on horses (Burchfield 1991:353)

They were removed from society at the age of six, before they became women, and were not allowed to have sex all their life. If they had sex, they could suffer the death penalty (Beard 1980:12–13). Roman women of the plebeian classes were not given a chance for education (Sawyer 1996:27). The patriarchal tendencies of the Roman society are even more pronounced in their dislike for the cult of Magna Mater for the freedom it gave the women<sup>47</sup> (Sawyer 1996:124).

#### **4.3.4 Women in the Corinthian Church**

All the perceptions of women described above, that is, the Jewish, Greek and Roman ones, would influence the way Paul wrote about women, including the behaviour of women in the community at Corinth. With the way the Jews, Greeks and the Romans perceived women, one would think that the women would not have found themselves in the church gathering praying and prophesying. However, somehow, they found a way into it. Whether this was due to the women's extra-ordinary qualities, or because of Roman's tolerance of women, or because of eschatological expectations where women were seemingly expected to assume the status of men, is not known. According to Murphy – O'Connor (1987:15) "It would be unrealistic to imagine that the contacts made during the Isthmian Games contributed nothing to the spread of Christianity in Greece." It is possible that the Isthmian Games liberated some women whom Paul encountered, which could explain his words in I Corinthians 11:2–16. Paul was probably in Corinth when these Isthmian games took place (Murphy–O'Connor 1987:16). Whether these games really played a part in the way women of Corinth found access to important roles in the Christian communities cannot be established with certainty. What we do know, as is evidenced by Paul's concern about how they conducted themselves in church gatherings, is that women found access to gathering with and participating along with men in the community at Corinth.

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<sup>47</sup> The cult of Magna Mater, together with the cult of Isis "were characterized by all kinds of extrovert behaviour—dancing, cross-dressing, wild hair or shaven heads, self-flagellation...." (Sawyer 1996:122)

Having seen how Jews, Greeks and Romans perceived women, it is not surprising that Paul talked to women (or about women) with such a discriminatory tone. In the researcher's view Paul only went along with the cultural prejudice of the day and treated women as subordinate to men. The sections that follow show in more detail how Paul's discriminatory sentiments were a subscription to the cultural discrimination/prejudice women suffered.

#### **4.4 PAUL ON WOMEN, GENDER AND ORDER IN THE CORINTHIAN COMMUNITY AS DEPICTED IN 1 CORINTHIANS 11:2-16 AND 14:34-35**

##### **4.4.1 "Woman" in the Pauline writings: a fixed term?**

Contemporary biblical scholars often approach the Pauline passages where women are explicitly mentioned with the question of what Paul said about women in his letters, what his views on them were. In her discussion of the matter Økland (2004:6-15) points out how complex the issue of "women" in the Pauline letters is. According to her it cannot be taken for granted that the term is "a relevant and innocent signification of people with female bodies (biologically and/or culturally marked)" (2004:12). She points out that the Greek word *gune*, and "woman", with which it is mostly translated, do not overlap semantically; the Greek word which Paul uses may not necessarily mean woman in general (Økland 2004:14). According to her the word from which "woman" is often translated may also refer to wife, daughter, whore, slave, slave girl or widow, with "wife" its most obvious reference. These terms can be regarded as different roles that a *gune* could have. The category of "women" is, therefore, not static but unstable, and functioned in ancient discourse as an "empty category with changing content" (2004:17). Paul's passages on women are open to an inconsistent reading. This is confirmed by the fact that Paul's texts yield to many different and sometimes contradictory perceptions of women (Økland 2004:20). Rather than regarding Paul to have a clear and specific view of women, positive or negative, it should be realised that, in an androcentric context, he would probably mainly have seen "women" as a category of otherness in relation to "men" (2004:21). Paul did not necessarily address the topic of "women" in its own right.

He talked about this in as much as it affected other topics which were important to him. An attempt should therefore be made to find out what Paul puts in the word "woman" in a specific text (Økland 2002:149). In the case of I Corinthians 11–14, he talked about women because he wanted peace, order and unity in what appeared to him to be a chaotic assembly. In the discourses of which Paul formed part, chaos and disorder were associated with femininity, and unity with masculinity. In the case of disorder, "woman" had to be put in "her cosmic correct place" (Økland 2004:21). Each Pauline text in question is part of a broader context, in which it should be understood. This is why Paul seems to contradict himself when the different texts are compared (Økland 2004:21–23). In trying to understand the texts which refer to women, a more fruitful approach would be to look for the gender structures on which the texts are based than for the word "woman" (Økland 2004: 8).

It is important to note that the word "woman", as used by Paul, is understood differently from the way we understand it. Women were in the category of otherness in relation to men, with all the implications of that. The context in which Paul addressed the issue of women was probably that he was trying to restore peace, order and unity in the church where chaos had come in.

I agree with Økland's view with regard to Paul and women. In the chosen passages of 1 Corinthians, women were only important as they related to issues such as peace, chaos and disorder. If women were the main subject of discussion, Paul would possibly have made explicit what category of women he was referring to. In Paul's androcentric society, it did not seem to matter how he addressed them, as long as the problem he wanted to solve got addressed. This becomes clearer in Økland's discussion of first century Palestinian women later on in this chapter.

#### **4.4.2 Possible contexts for 1 Corinthians, including 11–14**

According to Fatum (1991:70) there is widespread agreement that the Corinthians to whom Paul addressed his letters were "a congregation in a crisis". It was a mixed

congregation, with Christians differing among themselves and with Paul as a result of diversities and social tensions. Martin (1995:55-56) regards the conflict to be between the higher-status members and lower-status members in the community. Wire (1990:156), as cited by Økland (2004:11) is of the opinion that the whole of 1 Corinthians concerns a group of women in the community, the Corinthian women prophets. When Paul was arguing with the Corinthians and trying to bring them in agreement with him, a different and opposing view from that of Paul should be presupposed. The different point of view was that of the women prophets who were contesting against him. This implies that different points of view from Paul, as shown in 1 Corinthians 11 and 14, were addressing particular viewpoints of women prophets at different instances (in Økland 2004:11).

Proposals have also been made with regard to the specific context of 11-14 (cf. the discussion of Økland's work below). The aim of 1 Corinthians, including chapters 11-14, is regarded by many to bring about an orderly and unified *ekklesia* (e.g. the work of Økland already referred to). In a world in which everything was gendered, "problems of disorder and schisms" and the ideals of order and unity were "related to the problem of gender difference" (Økland 2004:172).

#### **4.4.3 1 Corinthians 11:2–16**

A lot of work has been done in trying to understand this complex Pauline passage. Every part of it has been discussed in detail. During the last few decades feminist biblical scholars did important work on this passage, using gender-critical tools to make visible the gender structures in the text (Økland 2002: 136-38).

Apart from differences in detail, two main trends can be identified in the interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11: 2–16. Some scholars are of the opinion that Paul is here creating, or subscribing to, a hierarchical social structure, with women subordinate to men. Others think that some kind of "equality" between men and women can be found in 1 Corinthians 11, since women are referred to as praying and prophesying, that is, taking part in the same activities as men. According to some scholars 1 Corinthians 11:11, 12

may also point in the direction of “equality” between men and women. This is regarded by some to be in conflict with 1 Corinthians 14, where women are commanded to be silent, and the deuterio-Pauline letters, where women are prohibited to teach (1 Tim 2: 8-15). Already in some early research the passages on women in the Pauline writings were regarded by some to contain two schools of belief. One of these perceived women as equal to men, while the other view shows women as less important, and their God - like image derived from men. According to Zscharnack these two beliefs were mutually exclusive, with only the former as authentic Christian (cf. Zscharnack in Økland 2004:9). However, Økland finds a problem with this statement since Paul mentions the supposedly mutually exclusive beliefs in the same passage (Økland 2004:9). The researcher supports the view that Paul was subscribing to a hierarchical social structure which marginalized women.

#### **4.4.3.1 The image of God and female inequality**

Fatum (1991) argues that, in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, Paul wanted to reinforce male sexual control and male superiority in the congregation (1991:72). According to her in this section of the letter Paul views and rebukes the women as females, that is as sexual beings, and not as Christians (1991: 72-74). This is clear from the fact that he here bases his argument on creation theology, and not on Christology and eschatology, as he does elsewhere in the letter (1991:72). By relating 11:3-9 to Genesis 1:26 and 27a (instead of 1:27b and 28), and by being silent on the relation between women and the image of God, Paul takes for granted that woman is not in God's image (1991: 77; Økland 2002: 182). In fact, from 11:7 it can be inferred that, for Paul, "man alone is the image of God and thus also to be considered as the direct reflection of the divine power and quality" (Fatum 1991:77).

Fatum emphasises the importance of the image of God in the order of creation. "It is the image of God which authorizes man's status of superiority and by contrast, woman's lack of status". In this view man was, moreover, created first, and the woman was only created second, from man and for the sake of man (1 Cor 11: 8, 9), which also implies the

superiority of man. Although man is subordinate to God and Christ, he is superior to woman, who is at the bottom of the hierarchical ladder (Fatum 1991:76, 77). In the words of Corrington (1993:225) she is the only one in the hierarchy of "heads" (11:3) who is nobody's head. According to Fatum Paul gives man both social and religious authority. Since the woman was created second and is not in God's image, she can only appear before God as man's property and must, therefore, be veiled and guided by man whose property she is (Fatum 1991:78, 79). She can only pray and prophesy before God as dependent on man, and not in her own right (Økland 2002: 146). "Being veiled, she signifies to God and to the world, on social and sexual terms, that she knows her place at the bottom of the hierarchy and acknowledges that she does not exist for her own sake, but belong to a man" (1991: 78). Failure to abide by these conditions shows that she wants to assume rights and honour not due to her and that is a disgrace to her (Fatum 1991:80).

Fatum presupposes, for this piece of social and moral guidance concerning women's behaviour and appearance, a context in which women behaved quite actively and independently, and who had an emancipated awareness of themselves as women (Fatum 1991: 72, 81; Økland 2002: 145), a situation which made it necessary to reinforce male sexual control in the community (Økland 2002:146).

From the discussion of Fatum's position it is clear that, in her view, there is in this passage no question of equality between man and woman: "...to Paul the terms of sexuality will remain the terms of hierarchic power and sexual control ... arranged to secure the supremacy and superiority of the man" (1991: 80). This has in her view to be admitted and made explicit over against apologetic readings of the text, in which Paul is made to appear as "women's friend through harmonization, excuse or even misinterpretation" (cf. Økland 2002:144, 145).

In sharp contrast with Fatum, Belleville (2003:216) thinks that 1 Corinthians 11:3-16 provides evidence for gender parity and mutuality. Not only male, but both male and female, bear the image of God. In the case of the former it is stated explicitly, while in

the case of the latter it is implicit in the text. In this regard she refers to Hooker, who wrote that Paul did not refer to women in the image of God because it was irrelevant to his purpose (Belleville 2003: footnote 6).

In Fatum's discussion two things stand out. Firstly, Paul used the difference between male and female sexuality to stress that woman is inferior to man. Secondly, Fatum presupposes a situation where women behaved in a way which showed an emancipated awareness of themselves.

To these two things which stand out in Fatum's discussion, the following observations can be added. The way Paul refers with ease to the creation story, and to the terms "head" and "head covering" would imply that he was basing his argument on a common cultural phenomenon which his readers understood very well and hence could not question. An important question would be "Do we share the same heritage?" The second observation comes from Fatum's presupposition – that is, women's emancipation. It would appear that despite putting them at the bottom of the ladder, women were not prepared to accept their imposed position – hence the tension which Paul was addressing. Churches which assume that women's position is at the bottom of the ladder should not be surprised to see that they may react to that at some point.

It is important to remember that although Paul is said to base his situating women at the bottom of the ladder, using a religious argument, that is the creation story, the real driving factor could be the cultural conventions described in 4.3.1.1, 4.3.1.2 and 4.3.1.3. As will be pointed out below, in the research undertaken on women's position in the Nkhoma Synod, some interviewees want women to be left out of leadership positions because of cultural prejudices against women. However, in the end they would quote Scripture only to authenticate their stand, while the real reason is simply their cultural prejudice. This may be the same with Paul.

#### **4.4.3.2 The possible influence of the Dionysus cult**



Hjort also interprets Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 as a way of promoting a hierarchical structure. According to her, in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 Paul aimed at stopping women from violating their husband's authority (Hjort 2001:59). She explains this passage in the light of the cult of Dionysus. What Paul reprimanded the Corinthian church community about, that is, ritual intoxication and religious promiscuity, were the very practices of the cult of Dionysus. She mentions that Dionysus gave tremendous liberty to women, a tendency which seems to have been growing in the Corinthian community and which bears resemblance to what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 (Hjort 2001:74). Hjort laments that Paul did not want women to have the freedom in Christ they had assumed – the freedom which is like that of women in the cult of Dionysus – but that they had to be under the control of men. Based on Hjort's explanation, one could say that Paul expressed his "hierarchical" sentiments with an aim of addressing a particular situation in question. It was a contextual issue and not universal in nature.

While Hjort's argument is plausible, it does not answer some of the important questions that arise from the passage. It does not explain, for example, why Paul asked women to cover their heads when praying and prophesying, and told men not to cover their heads.

#### **4.4.3.3 Some kind of equality?**

In the earlier stages of feminist biblical interpretation, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza claimed a substantial role for women in the early Christian communities. She even claimed equality between women and men in the Pauline congregations, and that women had leadership roles on an equal basis with men: "Without question they were equal and sometimes even superior to Paul in their work for the gospel" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:161). According to Schüssler Fiorenza the Corinthian Christian group was a pneumatic, ecstatic community who understood the significance of the Spirit and of Jesus Christ in terms of Sophia theology, with Sophia understood as a divine female figure (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983: 219, 226-233). The regulation regarding women's behaviour in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 should be understood in the light of Paul's missionary interests,

which would require that the worship should not be too offensive to possible converts. It reflects Paul's concern for decency and order, which is not a theological concern, but a social and practical one (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983: 236). Therefore, Paul was addressing a particular context.

#### **4.4.3.4 The term “head” in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16: an indication of hierarchy?**

Besides the issue of Paul's reference to "creation order", and only man having been made in the image of God (Fatum 1991), there is the question of the meaning of "head" in this section (1 Cor 11: 3-7, 10, 13). The meaning assigned to this term is important when considering whether Paul was in favour of a hierarchical structure, making men superior to women. In research on this passage it has received a lot of attention (cf Thiselton 2000: 812-833 for an overview). When Paul says that the woman's head is man, man's head is Christ and that Christ's head is God, (1 Corinthians 11:3), what does he mean?

Apart from the terms themselves, though related to these, broadly two different kinds of views exist on these matters – those which see here a relationship of “equality” between men and women and those who see and confront gender hierarchy and inequality in the texts.

According to Gill (1980: 221), Christ is called the head of man (1 Cor 11: 3) because he is the creator and preserver of all men, donor of all gifts to men and head of the church, and therefore of its members. Man is the head of the woman because he provides for her, cares for her and defends her against insults and injuries. And when it is said that God is the head of Christ, Paul was referring to Christ as man, because as far as his divinity is concerned they are equal (Gill 1980:221). Gill's apologetic explanation is simplistic and raises more questions than it attempts to solve. For instance, he does not explain why what Christ is to men does not apply to women as well. Does he not give women gifts and are women not also members of the church?

Equally simplistic a view, in a different way, is that of Calvin who merely takes for granted that man is the head of woman because she derives her origin from him, was created for the sake of man and is therefore subject to him (Calvin 1989:356). To put it in simpler terms, according to Calvin man is the head of woman and he should therefore rule over her and never should a woman be the man's boss. So to him the term "head" has something to do with domination.

Belleville, however, is of the opinion that the term "head" (*kephale*) does not mean master or ruler. According to her there is no evidence in the first century literature that *kephale* refers to master or ruler, except in the LXX, where Israel's *kephalai* refer to her foes. In most cases the term *kephale* means the physical head of a body. Sometimes it meant prominence, like the top of a mountain. It may also mean the beginning, source or the origin of something, for example the starting point of a river. In a few cases it means a leader (Belleville 2003:227, 228). Belleville points out that four New Testament texts refer to Christ as the *kephale* of the church. In all of them the idea is that Christ is the source, with connotations of "mystery" and caring. In her view *kephale* should mean pre-eminence and not master (2003:229). Since the term "Christ as the *kephale* of the Church" does not mean master, but that Christ is the source of the church, and also that Christ is the first born and that the church came after him, the same can be said about the relationship between men and women.

According to Belleville, Paul's aim could not have been to subjugate women. In 1 Corinthians 11:4, 5 he addresses both men and women who were indulged in prayers and prophecy in the community at Corinth. This was in line with the Greco-Roman religious practice where intercession and prophecy were fundamental activities of priests and priestesses of the cult. In making her case, Belleville quotes examples of Iuliane and Menodora who served as priestesses in the cult of Magnesia and Sillyon respectively. She then points out that by the second century BCE the tendency of priests and priestesses working side by side was on the increase. Contrary to Fatum, she regards the language in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 as evidence of gender parity and mutuality. Both male and female bear God's image, although for male it is plainly stated and for females it is implied.

Each depends on the other and each is from the other. Both are called to responsible behaviour (Belleville 2003:215-217. For Belleville, therefore, 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 are not about a hierarchical structure in favour of men. She reinforces her apologetic argument by using examples from the Greco–Roman religious context to show that women were not reduced to subordination to men. Crucial to her argument is that in her view the term *kephale* does not mean master, which means that Paul is not creating a hierarchical order to make men superior to women. But the terms with which Belleville translates *kephale* (i.e. source, pre–eminence, prominence, leader) all imply a higher status on the hierarchical ladder. Imagine the impression of the statements “the source of the woman is man” or “man is the first born, and the woman comes after him” or “the leader of a woman is man”. These terms do indicate that man is regarded as superior.

Jervis also states that the term *kephale* which Paul uses in 11:3 refers to physical heads as well as to sources. It carries with it the meaning of “source of being” (Jervis 1993:240, 241). The view that Paul was not creating a hierarchical structure in which the supremacy of men over women would be pronounced, is articulated by Jervis in the following statement:

“It is to be noted that the relationship between these four beings (Christ, man, woman and God) is not presented in terms of a chain of command, but (with Genesis 2 as a subtext) as a relationship between distinct beings whose difference is one which God intended from the beginning and which is fully appreciated and realised in redemption” (Jervis 1993:241).

Since Jervis denies that the relationships described by Paul is presented as a way of showing a chain of command, he is of the opinion that Paul is not creating a hierarchy which puts men in a position superior to women. Not showing a chain of command implies that the woman is not necessarily answerable to man, and man is not answerable to Christ and likewise Christ is not answerable to God. However, by considering other things which Jervis says, that is the distinction between the four beings, which God intended from the beginning and which is fully appreciated and realised in redemption, he

is seemingly of the opinion that Paul referred to a hierarchy which God had already put in place.

That the term “head” in 1 Corinthians indeed has hierarchical connotations, even if it is differently translated, has been argued convincingly by a number of scholars (cf Økland 2004: 174-176; Martin 1995). In this regard Økland (2004:175) remarks that, roughly up to the middle of the twentieth century, *kephale* was interpreted as referring to authority. Since the advent of modern feminism the translation "source" is often preferred. However, according to her it is not possible to strip Paul's use of the term from the hierarchical connotations it had in other contexts of the time. "'Source' is not a neutral concept in Greco-Roman discourse" (Økland 2004: 175). The source, origin, original or first-born was regarded to have superior status and priority vis-a-vis the imitation (Økland 2004:175, 176, also quoting Castelli 1991: 59-87).

#### **4.4.3.5 "Veiling" in 1 Corinthians 11: 2-16**

Another important matter worth considering with a view to the issue of male supremacy and female subordination has to do with the question of what Paul meant by the statement that women should not prophesy or pray without covering their heads. What was the function of a head covering? Before this question is considered, clarity is necessary as to whether this refers to an external covering or long hair. What connection, if any, did each of these two have with supremacy of one gender over the other?

Detailed attention has been paid to the issue of “veiling” in 1 Corinthians 11, while keeping in mind the importance of clothing in the first-century world and its relation to issues of class and gender. Witherington (1995:233) is convinced that when Paul talks about the covering of the head, he is referring to an external covering and not to long hair. He quotes two examples to support his argument. The first example is from Plutarch. Plutarch uses the same phrase as Paul, *kata kephales*, to refer to something resting on the head and not hair, much less long flowing hair. The second example is from Livy. Livy mentions that the head was covered not only when offering sacrifices,

but also during prophetic readings. This external liturgical covering of the head applied on equal terms to men and women. Witherington further points out that such kind of covering was not a general form of attire adopted by all people attending a sacrifice; it was only for those who took an active part in sacrifices. This is, according to him, crucial because in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 Paul is addressing those who actively engaged in prophecy. Still arguing that “covering one’s head” referred to an external covering, he points to a number of historical artefacts as evidence that those taking an active part in sacrifices were veiled. A statue was found in Corinth of the Emperor Augustus about to offer sacrifices and his head is covered. And a woman about to offer sacrifice to the god Mars as seen in the Louvre, had her head covered (Witherington 1995:233).

Even if the requirement of covering one’s head meant an external covering, there are still a number of questions with regard to Paul’s directives. Since the socio-religious norm in the Greco-Roman world had it that covering of heads both for male and female was a norm, Belleville thinks that the real puzzle is not why Paul issued a directive that women liturgists cover their heads, but why he directed men liturgists not to cover their heads and why he said covering of heads was shameful for male liturgists, especially since even in Judaic-priestly circles, covering of one’s head was a norm (Belleville 2003:222).

What was the function of the covering of heads to women, and the uncovering of heads by men? As stated earlier, Fatum says that the covering of woman’s head had the function of showing that she is man’s property, and that man is superior to woman (Fatum 1991:78, 79). Failure to abide by these conditions shows that she wants to assume rights and honour not due to her and that is a disgrace to her (Fatum 1991:80). Fatum’s explanation sounds plausible if one considers a man and a woman in a marriage set up. As observed by Belleville, in a marital situation the woman/wife shows submission to her husband who has authority over her, by covering her head. But the context of Paul’s directive is theological, for both prayer and prophecy are liturgical topics (Belleville 2003:223). Belleville emphasises that both men and women prayed and prophesied, and that both needed to meet requirements of covering or not covering their heads when engaging in liturgical activities. 1 Corinthians is, in her view, about gender

distinct worship, not about the subjugation of women (2003:225, 226). This is clear from terms like “nature” and “of man” (1 Cor 11: 8, 14).

Some scholars have mentioned that when Paul directed that women should cover their heads, he said so because there were some women who had loose hair, which was not only an indication of loose morals, but also an indication of worship practices of some cults. However, Belleville thinks that this is a misrepresentation of the situation. Archaeology shows that the majority of women members of some of the alleged cults such as Dionysius had their hair tied up. Women who followed Isis near Corinth had their hair wrapped in a transparent covering after anointing it (Belleville 2003:219).

It has also been suggested that there were three cultures involved in I Corinthians 11:2–16: the Greeks, the Romans and the Jews. In the case of the Jews both men and women covered their heads as they prayed. So did the Romans. The Greeks, on the other hand, sacrificed bare-headed (Goudge 1915:94). This view is shared, in a slightly different way, by Oster when he says:

“The Greeks’ self-identity arose most from their speech and education, while a Roman often distinguished himself by what he wore. It was not that Greeks eschewed head apparel. Rather it was clear to them and Romans that the habitual propensity of Romans to wear head apparel in liturgical settings stood in sharp contrast to the practice of others” (Oster 1988: 494).

It is then stated that since the Corinthian Christian community comprised of Gentiles and Jews, it was important that a people with such diverse customs had to be told a new order of worship. Therefore Paul had to define this new Christian practice in the interest of orderly worship (Goudge 1915:494). This explanation tries to justify Paul and tries to explain that he was not necessarily discriminating against women. It, however, fails to answer the question why Paul chose women to be veiled and not men. If in the Jewish and Roman customs both men and women wore a head cover during worship/prayer/sacrifice, why did Paul just expect women to continue with the practice

and exempted men? Perhaps the answer is that Paul forbade men to cover their heads because it resembled the Corinthian pagan custom where some priests of cults drawn from the elite of society distinguished themselves from other worshippers by praying and sacrificing with their heads covered. Because of this background, there could have been some among the minority of Christians from the social elite who wished to draw attention to their status praying or prophesying with their heads covered (Carson, France, Motyre & Wenham 2004:1178). If this is the case, Paul's reason to tell women to cover their heads when praying/prophesying, while men should do it with bare heads, was neither trying to create order in the service of worship nor to make men superior to women. He was trying to sort out an idolatry problem where some elite men drew attention to themselves, which was supposed to be due to God, by covering their heads.

It is also said that Plutarch indicates that the Romans uncovered their heads in the presence of other people, especially in the presence of those who were socially superior to them. This was a way of acknowledging that those people were worthy of honour (Witherington 1995:233). It is tempting, therefore, to conclude that Paul, on the basis of what has been said above, asked men to prophesy/pray with bare heads to show that Christ is worthy of honour. But why couldn't women be allowed to honour God in the same way men did? Probably women were not worthy to show that honour to Christ. In other words women were regarded too inferior to show that respect to Christ so that they had to carry on covering their heads.

#### **i. Head covering – long hair?**

As indicated above, some scholars think that Paul's directive that women should prophesy/pray with covered heads meant they should not shave their hair, but should prophesy/pray with long hair. This stand gains support from Paul's reference to a man's long hair as a dishonor to him (I Corinthians 11:14). Moreover, since the covering of one's head (using an external covering) in sacrifice/worship was practised by both Jewish and Roman men and women, how could Paul prohibit men from putting on an external head covering? In the catacombs men were represented as having short hair (Robertson



& Plummer 1958:236). Among the Greeks, long hair was regarded as an indication of homosexual behaviour (Blomberg 1995:210). It was shameful for women to shave their heads, and only those who were mourning did so. Although it was a sign of mourning, it was still a shameful thing. It was sometimes observed that some women cut only the tip of their hair, just to fulfil the custom, while maintaining their beauty (Clarke 1973:250, 251). This could be in keeping with Paul's directive that women should not prophesy/pray without a covering of long hair, and men should not prophesy/pray with a covering of long hair. However, in my opinion, it is more likely that Paul's concern was with women praying/prophesying without an external head covering, and he simply likened it to the disgrace of shaving her head (11:5, 6). I do not subscribe to the idea that 'head covering' was referring to long hair.

## **ii. Factions**

Another view is that Paul's command that women should cover their heads had to do with factions (Mitchell 1991). According to Mitchell, throughout I Corinthians Paul deals with factionalist behaviour. In 1 Corinthians 11 he deals with hair style because specific hair styles were emblematic of one's "party-affiliation" at Corinth as well as other parts of the ancient world. Paul is arguing for unity and an end to contentiousness which threatens unity (1991:149, 150). The women were told to cover their hair styles to avoid factionalism in the church (Mitchell 1991:262, 263). Since men were not included in Paul's directive, asking women only to cover their "hair style", does it imply that the hair styles which were emblematic of party-affiliation only involved women? Mitchell did not elaborate on this.

## **iii. Interpolation**

In her article discussed above Fatum points out that 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 differs in various respects from the rest of the letter (Fatum 1991:73-75). In a different way, and for different reasons, Walker (1975) also thinks that 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 does not fit into the letter, and in this section of it. According to him the text breaks at this point. He

points out that chapters 8–11:1 deal with eating and drinking. Immediately after 11:2–16 the theme of eating and drinking returns. 1 Corinthians 11:2–16, however, deal with relationships between males and females which are not related to the preceding and the following passages of eating and drinking. Walker suggests that 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 was put there by an editor, and was written by an author other than Paul, although the editor who put it in believed this came from Paul (Walker 1975: 99). It is said that 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 did not come from Paul because it is inconsistent with Paul's stand on women as reflected in Galatians 3:28. It is also inconsistent with Paul's commendation to women who worked with him. Besides, the passage is similar in tone and vocabulary to Colossians 3:18–19 and Ephesians 5:22–33, both of which are widely accepted as pseudo-Pauline. The use of the word "head" is another reason why Walker thinks that the text was not written by Paul. He says that the word "head" only occurs twice in the Pauline writings, in Romans 12:20 and 1 Corinthians 12:21 and in both cases it has a literal meaning. But the term has the same extended and metaphorical meaning in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 as in the pseudo-Pauline writings of Colossians 1:18, 2:10, 19; Ephesians 1:22, 4:15, 5:23 (Walker 1975: 104).

Trompf (1980) holds very similar views to Walker regarding the possible interpolation of 1 Corinthians 11:2–16, with slight variations to references. He says that 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 are an editorial interpolation because, when 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 are removed, 1 Corinthians 10:1–11:1 naturally blends with 1 Corinthians 11:17–34 as a continuous unit talking about eating and drinking (1980:198). Besides, 1 Corinthians 11:7–9, 12a bear resemblance to sexist statements of the deuterio-Pauline 1 Timothy 2:11–15 (Trompf 1980:205). He thinks that Paul's egalitarian views, where men and women are seen as equal, were not challenged at the time he uttered them. However, with the passing of time, these views were challenged or resented, hence the interpolation of 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 by an editor (1980: 213, 215).

Murphy-O'Connor disagrees with Walker that 1 Corinthians 11:3–16 was not written by Paul. He regards Walker's arguments as not convincing, although his suggestion would solve the problems the text presents (Murphy-O'Connor 1976:615).

Theories of interpolation bring the reader to an awareness that negative sentiments concerning participation of women in church gatherings were probably not the only definition of Paul's stand concerning women. In arguing for an interpolation, Walker points out that 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 are inconsistent with Paul's stand on women as shown in Galatians 3:28<sup>48</sup>.

#### 4.4.3.6 The issue of order and the place of women in the ritual gatherings

In her book *Women in their place* (2004) Økland provides an explanation for 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 and 14:34, 35 in which the two passages are kept together. According to her both 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 and 14:34, 35 (discussed below) fit well in the context of I Corinthians 11–14, a section which, in her view, deals with the ritual gatherings of the early Christians. It is significant that the section on ritual gatherings starts and ends with comments that produce gender difference (11:2-16; 14:33-40; Økland 2004:2, 170). To understand this section, including its talk on women, she distinguishes between the space of the household and that of the *ekklesia*. These may not have been different material places, but they were differently constructed ones. She defines the *ekklesia* as "the gathering of a local group of Christians who together form a collective body" (Økland 2004:137) and emphasises that the *ekklesia* is a ritually constructed sanctuary space, which is predominantly a male space. Therefore, male's and female's places in this space, and participation in it by male and female, had to be carefully and hierarchically ordered by patterns of action and clothing (such as head covering). This reflected a cosmological order which was in the first century world seen as gendered (2004:172, 217). The *ekklesia* was regarded as a male space since it carried the name Christ (2004:212), and the places of Paul, man, Christ and God (higher positions than that of woman) are described in male terms (2004:188).

Throughout chapters 11–14, Paul's main concern is order in the *ekklesia*. From chapter 11 to 14 he argues as if order were threatened. In 14:33, he even says that "God is not a

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<sup>48</sup> Not taking away what scholars have said about the interpretation of Galatians 3:28.

God of disorder, but of peace” (Økland 2004:208). Since disorder and chaos were in the then world commonly related to notions of femininity (as order and peace were with masculinity), it was necessary to order the *ekklesia* by putting women in their proper place (2004:172). The proper place for the women is seen in 11:3. And, if 11:1 is included, the hierarchy is God on the top, then Christ, then Paul, then man and finally woman (Økland 2004:177, 178). The woman’s place is the furthest from the divine. This, coupled with the fact that all other places are male places, shows that the *ekklesia* space was male space. Woman’s participation in the *ekklesia* is necessary, but they should know their place and fill that place the way it should be done (Økland 2004:188). According to Økland male and female, like God, Christ and angels, should in this passage be understood as cosmological entities: Paul here prescribes “how male and female as cosmological ‘spaces of representation’ should be ordered in relation to each other” (2004:178). Angels were mentioned (11:10) because they were perceived as guardians of ritual order (2004:184).

According to Økland a number of matters in 1 Corinthians speak against the view of equality between men and women in this passage. Her view of the hierarchical connotations of “head” has been referred to above. She points out that in 11: 2-16 Paul does not address women directly, but speaks *to men about* women's dress (Økland 2004: 77). Against scholars who think that Paul makes parallel statements to women and men, she points out that the main concern here is (prescriptions to) women (2004:185). 1 Corinthians 11: 11, 12 are about interdependence, which is not the same as equality. She also points to the different prepositions used with regard to men and women. While woman is “of man”, which refers to origin, man is “through woman”, an expression referring to the process by which a woman gives birth to a male child (1 Cor 11:12; Økland 2004:185). And, though prophecy is in 11: 5 ascribed to women, as to men, and is distinguished from speaking in tongues and placed above it by Paul (2004:197), the difference between male and female is still in place: “Women and men do similar things, but their actions are defined differently since they are doing them in different places of the hierarchy” (2004:199).

Økland points out that in 1 Corinthians 12:13, unlike Galatians 3:26-28, “not male and female” is omitted (2004:199, 200). This is, according to her, in accordance with 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, “where he uses relatively much space to argue that there *is* male and female” (2004:201). Apart from the conclusions she draws from the text itself, she points out that “gender equality” is a “modern concept and the term is not adequate to describe what Paul has the cultural possibility of doing” (2004:187).

On the head covering, Økland says that it was demanded by Paul because it covers the disruptive forces contained by a woman. When a woman's head is covered, her presence is no longer a threat to the male space where she is given the lowest position in the hierarchy (Økland 2004:239). The veil fences the woman and her disruptive forces in, thereby keeping that disruption and possible pollution in check and thus protecting the male environment against it (Økland 2004:193). The veil protects the male *ekklesia* space against chaotic female forces and enables women to work under cover in male space (Økland 2004:240). “Veiling”, moreover, points to the fact that male and female places are hierarchically ordered in relation to each other, with the woman who has to bear the gender difference (2004: 193, 194).

#### **4.4.3.7 Arguing from an ideology (or ideologies) of the body**

The centrality of the body and specific views of it in 1 Corinthians has long been realised. “The 'body' is the metaphor for the community itself (1 Cor 12: 25-35); the body is the arena of the spirit's operation (1 Cor 15; 35-49); and the body is also the result of union between man and woman (1 Cor 6:15-16; 7: 4-5; Corrington 1993:223, 224)”.

In his comprehensive study *The Corinthian Body* Martin (1995) discusses different ideologies of the body in Greco-Roman culture, and how they may contribute to the understanding of parts of 1 Corinthians. Martin points out that, in the ancient world, the human body was regarded as a small version of the universe, a microcosmos (1995:16, 18, 92). On the one hand the human body reflected the hierarchy in the universe and society. On the other hand, the human body as an analogy for human society was used

"to promote social unity by maintaining existing property and social relations and by discouraging conflict" (1995:92). "Conceiving the social group as a body is a strong strategy for establishing the givenness of the current order and hierarchy" (1995: 93). To this effect, he talks of the hierarchy of the head in relation to the rest of the body. The head was regarded as the most divine part of the body which ruled the rest of the body; the body was a mere vehicle for the head, carrying it around (Martin 1995: 30).

Martin regards 1 Corinthians as an attempt by Paul to put a stop to disunity at Corinth, which came about because of the different statuses of people there. There was a conflict between higher status people, on the one hand, whom Paul referred to as strong, and lower status people, referred to by Paul as weak, on the other (Martin 1995:56, 69). Because "Paul lived in a society with a long tradition of rhetorical treatments of concord" (1995:47), he used views on the hierarchy and harmony of the human body to bring harmony to the troubled church society of Corinth. As suggested by *homonoia* speeches, social disruption, that is class conflict, happens when hierarchy is disrupted. Therefore, the stronger may want to comply with the demands of the weaker for the sake of concord. However, this does not mean that they have given up their position of rulers. They give reasonable freedom to the poor, lower classes. And that is balanced by reasonable control by the rich, upper classes (Martin 1995:39, 42). In line with this women are allowed to pray/prophesy in church gatherings, but with set conditions to be strictly observed. The prominence of the head in relation to the rest of the body together with the harmony seen in the human body (i.e. that the less important parts do not revolt against the head) enable Martin to explain the importance of hierarchy and to argue that inequality was regarded to be both necessary and a healthy state of affairs (1995:92). Even if *kephale* in 11: 3 can have more than one meaning, the structure of this verse clearly points to the subordination of women (1995: 232). This is confirmed by 11:7-9, where man is referred to as the "glory" of God, and woman the "glory" of man, and where man is described as "not of woman", but "woman of man". He shares Økland's view that the interdependence between man and woman in 11:11 and 12 should not be regarded as gender equality.

Martin reinforces this view by saying that although some scholars have argued for equality between the sexes on the ground of Galatians 3:27–28, even in Galatians Paul does not portray them as equal, even if one bases one's argument on the assumption that the eschatological human being will be androgynous – where male and female become one. According to Martin androgyny does not mean that men and women will be equal. Androgyny has always been defined on male terms; it did not do away with hierarchy, but is hierarchy in practice. In Gnosticism, for example, androgyny called for women to become male in order to be saved and to become perfect; it is not the other way round, with men becoming female. This view was shared by many others, not just Gnostics (Martin 1995:230, 231).

Importantly, Martin relates the male-female hierarchy, the inequality between men and women in the Greco-Roman world, and in Paul, with first century views on physiology, with the fact that the substance that made up women's bodies was regarded to be different from that of males (Martin 1995: 249).

How should we understand prophecy in 1 Corinthians 11, and why were women commanded to wear a veil specifically when in prophecy or prayer?

In his discussion of veiling and unveiling in the Greco-Roman world Martin emphasises the connection between a woman's head and her sexuality. Veiling/unveiling had sexual significance: covering a woman's head functioned to cover her genitals. Taking as starting point for his discussion of the matter veiling/unveiling at a Greek wedding, Martin points out that the veil was not merely regarded as a symbol, "but actually effected a protective barrier guarding the woman's' head and, by metonymic transfer, her genitals" (Martin 1995:234). An important function of veiling was "to symbolize order over potential chaos; in ancient myth it connoted civilization" (1995:234). "To veil a woman ... meant not only to protect her but also to civilise her ... It meant to keep her intact but also to keep her in place" (1995:235).

Why is veiling here used in the context of prophecy? Although different views of prophecy existed, according to Martin prophecy was in the Greco-Roman world commonly regarded as “some material force acting on the body” (Martin 1995:239). From this “materialist” conception of prophecy, one can, according to him, understand why descriptions of it often had clear sexual connotations (1995: 239). The “physiology of prophecy”, the sexual significance of veiling together with the ambivalent role played by angels in Greco-Roman culture, imply, for Martin, that the meaning of Paul’s reference to angels “must include a sexual threat” (Martin 1995:245). Women are here regarded to be possible loci of dangerous invasion. Therefore they had to be veiled. Veiling “protected the woman’s body from dangers posed by external forces and protected the social body from dangers posed by the female body itself” (1995: 248).

In the researcher's view, Paul was indeed trying to protect the male sanctuary space in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16. In doing so, he subscribed to the social hierarchy of the time, in which women were regarded as subordinate to men. This stand stems from the perception the Jews, the Greeks, and the Romans had of a woman and her body, as has been discussed above.

#### **4.4.4 1 Corinthians 14:34–35**

As stated in the introduction, the seemingly different views on women of 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 and 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 are a cause of controversy among scholars. Some explain the difference by saying that 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 are an editorial addition. Others explain the difference in other ways. The following section deals with these explanations, with different interpretations of this passage and attempts to understand the relation between this passage and 1 Corinthians 11: 2–16.

##### **4.4.4.1 A non-Pauline interpolation?**

One of the proposals put forward to solve the problem of a seeming discrepancy between 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 is that the latter is an interpolation.



Conzelmann, and after him a number of scholars, argued that 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, to be more precise 1 Corinthians 14:33b–36, is a non – Pauline interpolation. It is said that the passage interrupts the topic of prophecy, which is under discussion here, and spoils the flow of thought. Furthermore, it is regarded to contradict Paul’s argument of 1 Corinthians 11:2–16. It also has linguistic and theological unique phrases. For example, the phrase “churches of the saints” is found nowhere else in Paul’s writings. The term which is translated “to be permitted” appears with the same sense only in the deutero-Pauline text of 1 Timothy 2:12. In fact, terms such as “to be permitted”, “silence”, “subjection” and “learn” make 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 seem related to 1 Timothy 2:11–15. Both these texts seem to allude to Genesis 3:16. The term “to subordinate oneself” is typical of household regulations as seen in the deutero-Pauline letters of Colossians and Ephesians. According to Conzelmann the atmosphere painted does not match that of Paul. 1 Corinthians 14:37 joins more easily to 1 Corinthians 14:33a. In some copies, 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 has been displaced and this shows that even certain scribes saw that this passage was a misfit in the context (in Ellis 1981: 213, 214).

Other scholars do not agree with this view, and for various reasons. Ellis thinks that despite the lack of smooth blending, Paul had a hand in the writing of I Corinthians 14:34–35. Either he asked his amanuensis to insert it or he wrote it himself as an afterthought just before the letter was sent to Corinth. This explains why the texture of 1 Corinthians 14: 34–35 is different from the rest of the passage (Ellis 1981: 219). Ellis points out that the principle stipulated in 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 is consistent with Paul’s teaching in general. In Paul’s teaching, a couple is to be mutually subject to one another, and submission of married women to their husbands is emphasised as a woman’s role in marriage. What Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35, if interpreted in this way, would be consistent with I Corinthians 11, where he states that “the head of a wife is her husband” and that “woman was made for man”. Therefore, the marriage role of women is apparent in 1 Corinthians 11, although not as conspicuous as in 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 (Ellis 1981:217). According to Ellis Paul’s directive in 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 was made in the context of prohibiting a wife to critique her husband’s message, since such an exercise would be disgraceful. It would be a disregard of him and of the woman’s role as a wife.

Paul, in 1 Corinthians 14:26–40, talks about the ministry of the Spirit. The “silence” demanded from women was regulative just like that imposed to tongue speakers (14:28) or prophets (14:30). Since women were in 1 Corinthians 11 allowed to prophesy, and Phoebe and Prisca are referred to as fellow ministers who participated in the ministry of teaching, one would be persuaded to think that the prohibition of wives in 1 Corinthians 14 is not because they are women (Ellis 1981: 18). In Ellis' view the directive

“Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says. And if they want to learn something let them ask their husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church.” (I Corinthians 14:34, 35),

is not about a hierarchy where men are regarded as superior to women, but about order in the church gatherings and consolidating the teaching concerning the relationship between husbands and wives without making women inferior to men.

Niccum (1997) also argues that 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 were written by Paul and were there right from the beginning. In considering views contrary to his, he cites work done by Fee, who points out that since there are only two types of texts, one with verses 34–35 in the proper place and the other with verses 34–35 after verse 40, the only explanation is that these verses, that is 34–35, were an editorial addition. In the final analysis Niccum dismisses Fee's arguments, saying that external evidence shows that his conclusion cannot easily be defended (Niccum 1997:242, 243, 247). He concedes that there are some texts which attest to verses 34–35 having been transposed. However, those which suggest that verses 34–35 are in their original order outnumber those that favour transposition. Besides, those that support the traditional order originate from a wider geographical territory (1997: 255). In fact, no Greek manuscript nor any Latin version omitted these verses (Økland 2004: 150; cf. also Wire 1990: 230, 231).

Having summarised the reasons for the interpolation theory, some of which have been referred to above, Økland asks what the similarities between 1 Corinthians 14: 34–35 and 1 Timothy 2:8–15 may *mean* in terms of the relation between the passages. Whereas 1

Corinthians 14:34–35 is often seen as post-Pauline in character, in her view the similarities with 1 Timothy could indicate that these passages are both “shaped within a broader pagan/or Jewish discourse with quite stereotypical notions about women’s roles in a certain type of religious setting” (Økland 2004:150).

#### **4.4.4.2 Prophecy, speaking, teaching – by married and unmarried women?**

Conceding that Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35, the question is how it should be understood, especially since it is regarded by some scholars as different from what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16. In 1 Corinthians 11:2–16, Paul presupposes that women prophesy/pray in public, only that they had to cover their heads, while in 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 he tells them to shut up altogether. They are not supposed even to ask questions in public. Was Paul subscribing to hierarchical views on gender relations, making men superior to women? Was this for the sake of order in the church gatherings? To what kind of activity does “speak” (*lalein*) refer?

Eriksson (1998) thinks that in 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35, Paul was addressing a specific problem. He was addressing women who were speaking in tongues. In principle women could prophesy (as Paul states in chapter 11), but the particular group of women, that is those speaking in tongues, were told to keep quiet. While in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 Paul was addressing a general situation, here he addresses a specific problem of women speaking in tongues. Therefore, while women were allowed to prophesy (1 Corinthians 11:2–16), the women pneumatics were not allowed to speak in tongues in public. According to him the problem is that this teaching, which was directed to a particular group, got canonised, hence it has been viewed as a general rule.

The idea that Paul was addressing women pneumatics in 1 Corinthians 12–14 is confirmed when one considers the similarities between Paul’s regulations for speaking in tongues and regulations for women in 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35. For example, tongue speakers are told to be silent, unless the tongues were interpreted or made

understandable. In a similar way women were to be silent. Both un-interpreted tongues and women speaking were prohibited in worship gatherings (Eriksson 1998:92, 93).

According to Eriksson Paul's address to women tongue speakers culminates in 1 Corinthians 14:34. He uses male/female contrasts as a way of explaining his argument. He associates prophecy with rationality, order with male social roles and *glossolalia* with women inferiority as it was understood then. His intention was to silence women tongue speakers in public gatherings (Eriksson 1998: 104). Therefore, in Eriksson's view, Paul wrote to stop women tongue speakers in public gatherings – he did not prohibit women to prophesy. However, one would still have questions as to how it happened that those who spoke in tongues were women only.

Other scholars tried to explain this by presupposing that two categories of women, women with different sexual status, are addressed in the two passages: the women referred to in 1 Corinthians 11 are regarded as virgins, widows or celibate, while 14: 34-35 is directed at married women (cf Økland 2004:9). Schüssler Fiorenza thinks that this is about non-Christian women and Christian women married to Christian men (in Økland 2004:9). Økland also cites Lone Fatum, who thinks that married women are addressed in 1 Corinthians 14: 33-34. Fatum explains the apparent contradiction between chapters 11 and 14 by saying that Paul was not talking about prophecy and prayer in chapter 14. Paul was here addressing a special issue of married women's participation in the "official duty of testing the spirits", as indicated in 1 Corinthians 12:10. Since the duty of testing the spirits involves charismatic authority as well as the right to question and criticise, 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 was stipulating a different norm for married women (Fatum in Økland: 2004:10). According to Økland, however, this explanation raises questions. Not only is the same word (*gune*) used in both chapters; it would be more appropriate to read chapter 11 as concerned with married women, since 11:11 and the argument from creation cannot really be regarded to exclude married women (2004: 10).

According to Økland 1 Corinthians 14 should be understood in the context of the distinction made in 1 Corinthians between *ekklesia* and *oikos*. 1 Corinthians 14, as part of

11-14, is not concerned with matrimonial issues (cf. Ellis 1981 discussed above), but with collective issues, and addressed to a collective ritual body (2004:217). It is concerned with the “construction of ritual space, where women’s places and men’s places, patterns of action (including speech), clothing and so forth should be kept distinct and hierarchically ordered. This order reflects a cosmos (here explored as space rather than time or ontology) which is also gendered, and the ritually constructed sanctuary space should be gendered in the same way” (Økland 2004: 217).

Against the view of Eriksson discussed above, she points to a number of reasons why *lalein* in 1 Corinthians 14 should be understood as teaching. In the broader ancient Mediterranean context female prophets were generally accepted, while female teachers were generally banned. In 1 Corinthians 11:35 a Greek word (*mathein*) is used which was used by Greek-writing Jewish authors to translate a term referring to the transmission of knowledge of written and oral Torah. In this regard she also refers to the point made by Fee that *lalein* is usually accompanied by "tongues" when glossolalia is meant. Both the use of "learn" and of "law" (14: 34, 35) indicate that Paul may here be drawing on early practices of rabbinic discourse, where women were not allowed to teach. According to her "Paul agreed with the more restrictive voices of this discourse in that he does not allow women even to take the position of the disciple, whose role it is to ask questions" (Økland 2004: 206; cf. also Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:399, 340; Clarke 1973: 279). In the case of women this "asking" has to take place in a different space than that of the *ekklesia*, the *oikia* space (Økland 2004: 206). She, moreover, points to the fact that speech itself was gendered, with *logos* (14:36) associated with male (2004: 207). Summarising her discussion of this passage Økland writes: "He promotes women's integration into the male ritual body. Yet the place for women remains at the bottom of the hierarchy, as silent listeners to the interaction between male teacher and male disciples" (Økland 2004: 207). Linked to the issue of “order” in this section (11-14), according to Økland it is implied that women who speak are connected to chaos and disorder (2004: 208).

The researcher agrees with Økland on how she explains the apparent contradiction of 1 Corinthians 11:2 – 16 and 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35. More of this is pointed out in the conclusion to this chapter below.

Sawyer thinks that Paul later forbade women to teach or have authority over men for two reasons: Firstly, women leadership made Christianity look like Montanism, whose leadership at that time consisted of one man and two women. Secondly, female authority was regarded to be only an interim one. In the long-term perspective, male leadership was supposed to be the normal way (Sawyer 1996:108, 109). In this case, it would appear that when Paul forbade women to prophesy/pray in public, it was because he did not want Christianity to be conducted on equal terms with Montanism. Therefore, his aim was not specifically to create a hierarchy, although women in this regard would still be indirectly made subject to men. Looking at Sawyer's second reason, it can be construed that Paul forbade women to prophesy/pray in public because, he wanted to put them under the authority of men, after having realised that equality of men and women was not the intended end – it was an interim one. Paul may probably have thought that the intended end had now come – therefore women had to keep silent and be content with being under the authority of men.

The change of tone perceived in I Corinthians 14:34, 35 has also been explained that at first Christianity accorded great liberty to women. That is why some women, for example Phoebe and Prisca (Romans 16:1–5) were in the fore-front in their work in the church, much to Paul's gratitude. However, the great liberty the Christian women enjoyed kindled excessive enthusiasm from them. Because of this development, Paul spoke in I Corinthians 14:34, 35 with a very prohibitive tone towards women (Buttrick 1984:212). If this was the reason, one would say that Paul was simply trying to create order in a church gathering, assuming that women's excessive enthusiasm brought disorder in the church.

#### **4.4 CONCLUSION**

In the discussion of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and 14: 34-35 and their possible contexts a number of issues which dominated the research on these texts have been discussed, and the different views that scholars have on these. While all are attempts to understand these passages, some focus more on the texts themselves and on crucial terms in these texts, as understood in other sources of the time, while others pay more extensive attention to the broader contexts and discourses of the Greco-Roman available to Paul, for example views on the body, the relation between female sexuality and disorder (Martin 1995), and the different kinds of clothing and activities required from male and female in specific spaces, in this case ritually constructed sanctuary space (the *ekklesia*; Økland 2004). One of the trends in the research is that some scholars attempt to exonerate Paul from subscribing to gender hierarchy and the subjugation of women, while others regard his injunctions to women to fit well into the contexts and discourses of the world of which he formed part.

In the light of the discussion of issues such as “head”, “veiling”, “prophecy” and “speak” within the broader contexts and discourses of the then world, and some scholars’ views on these, it has to be questioned whether there is really a contradiction between the two passages as far as gender roles and relations are concerned, a view behind much of the research on the passages, including the interpolation theories. It seems as if gender difference and hierarchy, characteristic of the then world, are intact in both passages. In 1 Corinthians 11 this is kept intact by means of the required clothing for male and female, and in that the same function (prophecy) is fulfilled in a different part of the hierarchy (Økland 2004: 199). In 1 Corinthians 14 it is kept intact by prohibiting women to take part in activities such as teaching reserved for males.

Important for this study is that, if these texts are interpreted uncritically, and read without taking the contexts in which they originated into account, thereby regarding them as timeless prescriptions to women, they can indeed be used to keep women from leadership positions in the church.

With regard to the kinds of interpretation, apologetic interpretations of 1 Corinthians 11:2–16, where Paul is exonerated from discriminating against women, presenting him as advocating equality between men and women, are far less convincing. As stated above, these scholars either do not answer some of the important questions or create more questions.

Most of the scholars who have argued, sometimes from a gender-critical perspective, for a case of Paul creating hierarchical structures, placing men above women, have put forward plausible arguments. The researcher sides, particularly, with Økland, since her arguments explain most of the important issues of these Pauline writings. The explanation that Paul, in 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35, was referring to teaching and not to prophesying, is convincing and accounts for the apparent contradiction between 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 and 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35. Her argument that *ekklesia* was predominantly a male space and that, therefore, the place of women had to be defined, contributes to a better understanding of both 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 and 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35. Her reasoning confirms the idea that Paul, in addressing these women, was simply subscribing to an already existing cultural prejudice against them.

By arguing from the ideology of the body, Martin offers, in the researcher's view, credible explanations for important issues in the relevant passages.



## CHAPTER 5

### A survey of current perceptions about women in the Nkhoma Synod

#### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter deals with current attitudes of people in the Nkhoma Synod towards women. As stated earlier, women have been kept away from leadership positions. They have not been allowed to be deacons, church elders or church ministers. Until October 2007, they have not been allowed to preach during Sunday and Wednesday church services, or any other occasion when men are present in the audience (Minute S3975 of the Nkhoma Synod, 18 to 23 October 2007). The body of women in the Nkhoma Synod called *Chigwirizano cha Amai* has not been spared from men's dominance. There is the position of *mkhalapakati* – a male who is always present in all *Chigwirizano cha Amai* gatherings. Although he is supposed to be an observer and a coordinator between *Chigwirizano cha Amai* and the session, he influences decision making in *Chigwirizano cha Amai*. In the annual *Chigwirizano cha Amai* conferences and other gatherings, the main speaker is the church minister—and therefore male.

The question is: What is the cause of this marginalisation? To help find out the cause/root of women marginalisation, a research questionnaire has been formulated and research conducted in a number of selected congregations/areas.

#### 5.2 CATEGORIES OF SELECTED CONGREGATIONS/AREAS AND PEOPLE INTERVIEWED

##### 5.2.1 Congregations/areas chosen

The congregations/areas chosen fall into four categories, namely rural congregations, semi-urban congregations, urban congregations and the synod headquarters. Although it is the same church, each location will have its own unique influence on the church and hence may have different responses to the questionnaire. Different locations will have

people with different exposures as far as relations with women are concerned. The congregations chosen were Mtunthama C.C.A.P., which is in an area classified as semi-urban, Chimutu C.C.A.P., in a rural area, and Chikuluti C.C.A.P. in Lilongwe, the capital city of Malawi. The Nkhoma station was chosen because it is the headquarters of the synod. After choosing the different categories, Chimutu and Chikuluti congregations were chosen by a random sampling out of the rural and urban congregations respectively. Mtunthama semi-urban congregation was, however, chosen because of proximity to the researcher's place of residence so as to cut down the costs. This was done after considering that, since it meets the requirement of being a semi-urban congregation, it is just as good as picking any other place in that category.

### **5.2.2 Other precautions taken**

Care was taken to make sure that the researcher's stand regarding women was concealed so as not to affect the responses of the people interviewed. For this reason people who knew the researcher well were mostly avoided, unless the interviewee was known to be someone who speaks his/her mind whether it pleases you or not.

### **5.2.3 People interviewed**

The total number of people interviewed was 144, with an average of 36 per station/congregation. There were negligible variations of interviewing one or two more people in one congregation and one or two less in the other. However, in general, care was taken to take the same number of interviewees in each congregation. 72 of the people interviewed were male and 72 female. The ages of the people interviewed range from 20 to 78 years. An even number of men and women was deliberately chosen to accommodate a representative range of possibilities.

## **5.3 RESULTS**

Responses from men					Responses from women				
Position	Yes		No		Position	Yes		No	
	No.	%	No.	%		No.	%	No.	%
Women Deacon?	53	74	19	26	Women Deacon?	66	92	6	8
Women Church elder?	52	72	20	28	Women Church elder?	65	90	7	10
Women Church minister?	36	50	36	50	Women Church minister?	57	79	15	21

Figure 1. Should women be deacons, church elders or church ministers?

### 5.3.1 Reasons given by men who were for and against the idea of women becoming deacons

Reasons given by men who gave a positive response (Starting with the most to the least frequently cited reasons – this procedure will be followed throughout)	Reasons given by men who gave a negative response (Starting with the most to the least frequently cited reasons – this procedure will be followed throughout)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Men and women are created in the same image, that of God.</li> <li>Women are more diligent.</li> <li>Gender equality</li> <li>Some women have better leadership skills.</li> <li>Some women are traditional leaders.</li> <li>Women are in majority in our church.</li> <li>Women are part of the body of Christ.</li> <li>There will be more people to choose leaders from.</li> <li>Equal representation of the two sexes</li> <li>Women were the first people to preach about the resurrection.</li> <li><i>Chigwirizano</i> shows that women are better organisers.</li> <li>There were women in Jesus' ministry.</li> <li>Women will minister more effectively to fellow women. than men do to women</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Women are morally weaker than men.</li> <li>Women will have the opportunity to see other men besides her husbands, because they will be moving from house to house.</li> <li>Women are normally very busy with house chores.</li> <li>Mobility will be difficult when a woman is experiencing monthly periods.</li> <li>Jesus had male disciples only, so why should we include women in leadership?</li> <li>When Adam and Eve sinned, God demanded an account from Adam and not from Eve.</li> <li>If women are allowed to be deacons, they will soon demand to be elders.</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Other synods allow women to be deacons.</li> </ul>	
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Figure 2, showing reasons given by men who were for and against the idea of women becoming deacons.

### 5.3.2 Reasons given by women who were for and against the idea of women becoming deacons

Reasons given by women who gave a positive response	Reasons given by women who gave a negative response
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Created in the same image – that of God</li> <li>• Women have better experience in dealing with financial problems in the family, which is handy when dealing with church financial matters.</li> <li>• Some women are more talented than men.</li> <li>• Women are in the majority in our church.</li> <li>• Some issues can be solved by women only.</li> <li>• Women are good comforters.</li> <li>• Jesus' authority was given to both men and women.</li> <li>• Leadership enhances spiritual growth.</li> <li>• Women were the first to talk about the resurrection.</li> <li>• We have some women traditional leaders already.</li> <li>• Women are more diligent.</li> <li>• Gender equality</li> <li>• Women are better organisers.</li> <li>• There are biblical examples of female deacons.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women are too busy with house chores.</li> <li>• Women are now allowed to preach<sup>49</sup> in church both during the Wednesday and Sunday gatherings.</li> </ul>

<sup>49</sup> All along women have not been allowed to preach until October 2007 when the prohibition was removed (Minute S. 3975 of the Nkhoma Synod meeting held on 18 to 23 October 2007). These women respondents were referring to this new development. It should be stated that preaching in C.C.A.P. Nkhoma Synod is not restricted to ministers only. Mwale (1979:26) described the duties (a kind of job description) of a church elder – who is not a church minister. One of the duties Mwale refers to is “...feeding the congregation by preaching the Gospel”. This privilege is open even to those who are not church elders. While everyone else was allowed, women were until recently not allowed to preach. It is therefore said that women should be content with the new development.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women are better behaved than men.</li> </ul>	
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Figure 3, showing reasons given by women who were for and against the idea of women becoming deacons.

### 5.3.3 Reasons given by men who were for and against the idea of women becoming church elders

Reasons given by men who gave a positive response	Reasons given by men who gave a negative response
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both men and women are created in the image of God.</li> <li>• There are some female traditional leaders.</li> <li>• Female church elders will render a better service to fellow women.</li> <li>• Women were the first to preach about the resurrection of Jesus Christ.</li> <li>• Some women have better leadership qualities.</li> <li>• The Bible includes examples of women as church leaders in various capacities.</li> <li>• Some women have attained higher academic qualifications, which are essential for leadership.</li> <li>• Women are in the majority in the Nkhoma Synod.</li> <li>• Other synods have female church elders.</li> <li>• Women are more diligent.</li> <li>• Women will also manage to go through the training as church elders and will perform just as men do.</li> <li>• They will be playing a more meaningful role in the church</li> <li>• A church elder is supposed to visit those who are hospitalised. How can a man visit the labour ward where women give birth to children?</li> <li>• Women are more patient.</li> <li>• Some women are better preachers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The woman cannot go up the pulpit to preach when she is pregnant.</li> <li>• When women are menstruating, it will not be appropriate for them to go up the pulpit to preach.</li> <li>• Paul demanded that women should learn in silence. They cannot be elders, since elders have to speak in public.</li> <li>• As elders, women will be in the company of men making decisions. This situation will present itself as a constant temptation to men.</li> <li>• According to Malawian culture, it is not allowed for women to stand up and speak to men whilst men are seated.</li> <li>• The Bible states that women are weaker than men and therefore cannot be good leaders.</li> <li>• When Adam and Eve had sinned for the first time, God asked Adam for an account, and not Eve.</li> <li>• The woman is by nature shy.</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women are part of the body of Christ.</li> <li>• Gender equality should prevail even in the church.</li> <li>• There will be more people to choose leaders from.</li> </ul>	
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Figure 4, showing reasons given by men who were for and against the idea of women becoming church elders.

#### 5.3.4 Reasons given by women who were for and against the idea of women becoming church elders

Reasons given by women who gave a positive response	Reasons given by women who gave a negative response
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women are more active in church than men.</li> <li>• They were the first to tell the world about the resurrection of Jesus.</li> <li>• There are more women in the church.</li> <li>• It will ease the problem of a lack of leaders.</li> <li>• Biblical examples of women (O.T.)</li> <li>• Women will advise the church minister well on women issues.</li> <li>• They are better comforters than men and will therefore make better preachers at funerals.</li> <li>• Women are good advisers and yet they are not represented in session, which is the decision making body of the church.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some women are not well mannered. They just want to rule men. Giving them the chance to be elders will make the situation unbearable for men</li> <li>• Women have other responsibilities in the church already (through <i>Chigwirizano cha Amai</i>).</li> <li>• Women are very busy with house chores.</li> <li>• Compared to men, women are less able to discharge leadership duties.</li> </ul>

Figure 5, showing reasons given by women who were for and against the idea of women becoming church elders.

### 5.3.5 Reasons given by men who were for and against the idea of women becoming church ministers

Reasons given by men who gave a positive response	Reasons given by men who gave a negative response
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some women have better leadership qualities.</li> <li>• Since the woman is the bone and flesh of the man, they are the same as and equal to men.</li> <li>• Some women are equally highly educated and they pick up jobs that were traditionally for men only.</li> <li>• Women will be better ministers, since many of them are more concerned with the plight of people than men are.</li> <li>• Women were better placed in Jesus' ministry than men were. For instance, women were the first to tell the world about the resurrection of Jesus, and a woman was the mother of Jesus.</li> <li>• Other churches do have women ministers.</li> <li>• In Joel 2, women are filled with the Holy Spirit as well.</li> <li>• Women are better mediators.</li> <li>• Since there are female government ministers, why not have female church ministers as well?</li> <li>• God is not blessing the Nkhoma Synod enough because of the Synod's segregation policy.</li> <li>• Women have remained at the bottom of the church hierarchical ladder for a long time just because of tradition, while they are just as capable.</li> <li>• Woman ministers will teach, while church elders will rule.</li> <li>• Equality of men and women is mandatory and it is the right of women to be treated as equal to men.</li> <li>• Church ministers are servants, and the call to serve is to all Christians, both men and women.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women are short tempered.</li> <li>• The minister's job is too demanding.</li> <li>• Women are too busy with house chores.</li> <li>• Women will not be able to cope with the training ministers have to undergo.</li> <li>• It will be against the tradition of the church.</li> <li>• It is not right for a woman to be in the company of men.</li> <li>• A female minister will not be able to discharge her duties when she is menstruating.</li> <li>• Women are morally weaker than men.</li> <li>• Women must be ruled by men.</li> <li>• When the minister becomes pregnant, she will fail to discharge her duties properly.</li> <li>• Jesus' disciples were all male.</li> <li>• It should suffice for women to be mere helpers and not to be in control.</li> <li>• 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 say that a woman is supposed to be quiet in the presence of men.</li> </ul>

Figure 6, showing reasons given by men who were for and against the idea of women becoming church ministers.

### 5.3.6 Reasons given by women who were for and against the idea of women becoming church ministers

Reasons given by women who gave a positive response	Reasons given by women who gave a negative response
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women are strong believers in God.</li> <li>• Women are very hardworking when not oppressed.</li> <li>• Women are better advisers than men.</li> <li>• Women are better comforters than men.</li> <li>• Women are development conscious. That is why even most of the farming is done by women.</li> <li>• Women are in the majority. They will therefore evangelise more people.</li> <li>• Women are more talented than men.</li> <li>• Some women are shy to reveal their spiritual status to male leaders. Female leaders will therefore be more appropriate.</li> <li>• Naturally women are kind, soft-hearted, understanding and good counsellors. These and many other qualities make up good leaders.</li> <li>• We do have women leaders in the secular sphere.</li> <li>• Women are very careful with money.</li> <li>• Women can also train, like male ministers.</li> <li>• Although people in our synod are not used to it, there is nothing wrong with women becoming ministers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women are very busy people.</li> <li>• Women who want to be ministers are not respectful to men. This is a way of telling the men that they are not doing their job as ministers well.</li> <li>• Women came from men and therefore they cannot rule men.</li> <li>• A minister's job requires one to be brave and not soft hearted.</li> <li>• Women ministers will make male ministers indulge in sexual immorality, especially when ministers congregate for various synod meetings.</li> <li>• Women cannot be trusted with the work of a church minister.</li> <li>• Society trusts men more easily.</li> <li>• The head of woman is man, therefore only man should occupy that position.</li> </ul>

Figure 7, showing reasons given by women who were for and against the idea of women becoming church ministers.

### 5.3.7 People's views on the idea of women preaching to other women



Besides asking people's opinion whether or not to include women in leadership positions, a question was asked to find out people's opinion on the idea of women preachers. Question 7 in particular asked for people's opinion concerning women preaching to fellow women. The men interviewees have perceived question 7 as an unnecessary one because, as far as the men are concerned, they have seen women preaching to fellow women since the birth of *Chigwirizano cha Amai*, back in 1940. Their responses, therefore, have been equally divided between those who simply say "It is a good thing", and those who say "This is nothing unusual. This is already happening". Interesting answers, however, came from women. Out of the women who were interviewed, there is not one woman who has said that it should not happen. Only one woman did not comment on the question. Some women simply commented that it is a good thing. Other women said that it is already happening. However, some women said that this is supposed to be done. Women should preach to fellow women, since they have the same interests and can therefore better relate to one another. One woman particularly mentioned that there is already enough preaching by men to which women listen in other gatherings. It is, therefore, important to let women preach in forums where only women gather. Other women said that women in the audience will be more open with a woman preacher and that a woman preacher will be more open with women in the audience than a man would be.

As stated in the paragraph above, when men were asked to comment on the idea of women preaching to fellow women, they did not even see the question as worth asking, since they have seen women preaching to fellow women since the birth of *Chigwirizano cha Amai*. They failed to perceive that a church minister (male) preaches to women in the annual *Chigwirizano cha Amai* meetings. However, for the women, the situation was different. They saw the question as an opportunity to complain against male preaching to the gathering of women. What men saw as an unnecessary question, women saw as a very important one. This makes the Chewa proverb, "*Mtaya makoko saiwala, aiwala ndi m'dya nyemba* – The 'thrower-away-of-the-shells' does not forget, the one who forgets is the 'eater-of-the-beans'" (Chakanza 2000:213), come true. The moral teaching of the proverb is that (s)he who suffers injustice has a better memory of the experience.

So for question 7 men did not see any problem, because they construe the situation as already happening. However, the women regarded their freedom as being infringed upon by men intruding in a women forum.

#### **5.4 IS THERE ANYTHING WHICH SHOULD BE DONE FOR WOMEN WHICH IS NOT DONE NOW? (Question 9 of the questionnaire)**

##### **5.4.1 Introduction**

The major outcry was that the church should allow women in leadership positions. This response was stated in three ways. One was that women should be allowed in leadership positions, without specifying the leadership positions of deacons, elders and ministers. Another was the explicit statement that women should be allowed to be deacons, elders and ministers. The third was that women should be allowed to be deacons and elders (without mentioning ministers). The latter has been counted separately from the responses indicating deacons, elders and ministers or just leadership positions.

##### **5.4.2 Men's and women's responses**

Men's response	Women's response
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The church should allow women to be deacons, church elders and ministers.</li> <li>• The church should allow women to be deacons and church elders.</li> <li>• There is nothing that the church should do which is not now being done.</li> <li>• Women should be allowed to attend the session, which is a decision- making forum.</li> <li>• The church should embark on a programme to help with the education of women.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The church should allow women to be deacons, elders and ministers.</li> <li>• The church should allow women to be deacons and elders.</li> <li>• The church should allow women to attend sessions and contribute to its deliberations.</li> <li>• The church should help in the education of women so that they may be equal to men.</li> <li>• The church should address the mode of dress so that women dress respectfully in church.</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women should be given the responsibility of looking after church funds because men have proved to be not trustworthy.</li> <li>• The church should mobilise and sensitise women to speak with one voice against their oppression.</li> <li>• The church should support women in their development projects.</li> <li>• The church should train girls by sending them to school so that when they grow up, they will be equal to men.</li> <li>• The church should make women equal to men in all areas, as is the case in secular sectors. It should send women for theological training as well.</li> <li>• Women should be protected from physical abuse by men and from property grabbing by relatives of deceased husbands.</li> <li>• The church is now allowing women to preach, which should stop immediately.</li> <li>• The church should train women on proper manners in the church.</li> <li>• The church should tighten its restrictions on women, since presently there is not enough of that happening. Consequently women are thinking of breaking loose from men and start governing themselves.</li> <li>• The church should make policies to empower women.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Men should take a leading role to abolish discrimination against women. This is not happening now.</li> <li>• Women should be allowed to express their ideas and feelings about the discrimination. The way things are now, women are only told that the session has declined the proposal that women be deacons, elders or ministers. Women are not even given the chance to express their ideas on the topic.</li> <li>• The church should allow women to meet on their own and discuss their discrimination by the church. In this way some of the women who are indoctrinated may be enlightened on the implications of discrimination.</li> <li>• The church should accord women the same chances to theological education that men have.</li> <li>• The church should help women by funding the projects women initiate in the church.</li> <li>• There is nothing that the church is not doing which should be done now.</li> </ul>
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*Figure 8, showing responses by men and women to the question "Is there anything which should be done for women which is not done now?"- (Question 8 on the Questionnaire)*

## **5.5 PEOPLE'S VIEWS ABOUT 1 CORINTHIANS 11:2-16 AND 1 CORINTHIANS 14:34, 35**

### **5.5.1 Introduction**

This section consists of views on these passages coming from men and women. Since the question of including women as ministers received the stiffest opposition, it has been decided that it could be an appropriate factor to consider when looking at responses concerning 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 and 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35. Each respondent was interviewed separately. It should be pointed out that, although the question was specifically about people’s views on and understanding of the two passages, some related it to leadership positions.

### 5.5.2 People’s views on 1 Corinthians 11:2–16

“I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the teachings, just as I passed them on to you. Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head – it is just as though her head were shaved. If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head. A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head. In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman.” (NIV)

#### 5.5.2.1 Views from men

Views from men who supported the idea of including women in church ministerial positions	Views from men who opposed the idea of including women in church ministerial positions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 Corinthians 11:2–16 should be understood in the context of the first century Mediterranean world. It may not necessarily be applicable to us.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The clear boundaries of authority should not be crossed. The hierarchy of man being the head of woman and Christ of man should be followed</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 says that man is the head of woman, this is referring to the flesh. However, spiritually man and woman are equal.</li> <li>• 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 refers to Corinthian women who were converted from being reckless women, some of them being whores.</li> <li>• Although 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 seems to indicate that man is superior to woman, men and women are equal.</li> <li>• 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 is right in saying that the head of the church is Christ. But the saying that the head of woman is man should not be accepted.</li> <li>• Covering of heads should be followed just because it makes our women look more beautiful.</li> <li>• Although 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 seems to imply that woman is lower in rank than man, in Genesis it is said: “It is not good for man to be alone”. This means that man is not complete and he needs a ‘super sub<sup>50</sup>’ to succeed in life. The woman is that ‘super sub’.</li> <li>• 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 was not a general rule and therefore it does not necessarily apply to us.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>without questioning.</li> <li>• God was not foolish to institute this command. We should not go against it. Instead we should obey it by keeping women in the background.</li> <li>• 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 is explicit about the roles of men and women.</li> <li>• 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 was addressing a contextual issue. It was describing the tradition of the first century Mediterranean world. Christianity had to go along with it in order for it not to be an abomination to the surrounding world.</li> <li>• Man is mandated by God to rule. This is not the case with the woman. The woman should be kept in the background.</li> <li>• 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 shows that if the woman is to rule at all, she can only rule children.</li> <li>• 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 shows that the woman should merely be a helper.</li> <li>• 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 confirms that the woman is the weaker of the two people.</li> <li>• 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 refers to family life and not church life.</li> </ul>
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*Figure 9, showing views on 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 of men who were for and against women becoming ministers*

Some of the interviewees seemed not to understand the passage or are simply not acquainted with it, since a number of men did not comment on the question.

<sup>50</sup> The ‘super sub’ term comes from the football game, referring to a player who is kept on the bench and is introduced at a point when the team is not doing well. This ‘super sub’ improves the game and his influence often makes his team win.

On the whole, the men who supported the idea of including women in ministerial positions are of the opinion that 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 addressed a contextual issue and that it does not necessarily affect us. To this effect some tried to explain the context of Corinth by citing immorality by the Corinthian women of the time, while others referred to biblical texts which seem to speak positively about women.

The majority of interviewees in the category of men who opposed the idea of including women in ministerial position, agreed with 1 Corinthians 11:2–16, saying that the passage is an indication of God's wish that men should lead and women follow. They followed a literal/uncritical interpretation of the passage. However, the interviewees who are church ministers did not agree with the use of this passage as a reason to discriminate against women. Again, judging from the number of men who did not comment, it is apparent that some of them do not understand the passage or are not familiar with it. Some seemingly agreed with it because it was a rubber stamp to their existing attitude towards women. They may not have been acquainted with it, but since it seemed to back their stand, they went for it.

### 5.5.2.3 Views from women

Views from women who supported the idea of including women in church ministerial positions	Views from women who opposed the idea of including women in church ministerial positions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Although 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 puts women in a lower position, the same Bible talks very favourably of other women.</li> <li>Since the Bible in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 says that the head of the church is Christ, it means that Christ is the supreme head. Therefore, man and woman are equal.</li> <li>1 Corinthians 11:2–16 addressed the context of the first century Mediterranean world.</li> <li>The culture of Corinth at that time was barring Corinthian women from taking leadership positions.</li> <li>1 Corinthians 11:2–16 was talking of a cultural thing,</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It has been decreed by God that the woman should respect her husband. If she insists on occupying leadership positions, she is not respectful to her husband and obedient to God.</li> <li>The woman was created for man.</li> <li>Women are weaker than men.</li> </ul>

which could not even be supported by Genesis 1:26–27, which talks of man and woman being in God's image.	
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*Figure 10, showing views on 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 of women who were for and against women becoming ministers*

Some of the women who supported the idea of women becoming church ministers said that 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 addresses the Corinthian context. However, compared to men, the number of women who interpreted the passage in this way is much less. There are more women who interpret 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 in a literal/uncritical way than men. The reason for this is probably that no women among the interviewees have theological training. However, although some of the women interpret 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 in this way, they refuse to accept the discrimination.

The responses of women who were against women becoming church ministers give us a different picture. Besides giving a purely literal/uncritical interpretation, women in this category gave men exclusive rights to leadership. They agreed with the passage in everything it says without questioning anything. Again there is an indication that some women did not understand the passage, since some failed to comment on the question concerning 1 Corinthians 11:2–16. Some of the answers showed that the interviewees had not seen this passage before.

### **5.5.3 People's views on 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35**

1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 read:

Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church

#### **5.5.3.1 Views from men**

Views from men who supported the idea of including women in church ministerial positions	Views from men who opposed the idea of including women in church ministerial positions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 was in line with the context of that time and area. It does not concern us.</li> <li>• The message was for those particular women who had loose morals.</li> <li>• 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 is not a realistic command. What do you make of women who are gifted speakers? Do you just allow their talent to waste away?</li> <li>• "Keeping quiet" might have meant something very different from how we understand it.</li> <li>• Not every woman has a husband or father at home to ask.</li> <li>• 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 forbids useless talk – it did not forbid preaching.</li> <li>• 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 must mean something different because it cannot be accepted that the mother, as important as she is, is being denigrated.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 refers to the context of the Corinthians in the first century. However, women should not be talkative when they are in the presence of men.</li> <li>• The woman is lower in hierarchy than man, and therefore, it is appropriate that she remains silent.</li> <li>• Women should indeed remain silent. We cannot act against the Scriptures.</li> <li>• 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 was written to protect the woman who is usually shy.</li> </ul>

*Figure 11, showing views on 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 of men who were for and against women becoming ministers*

Men who support the idea of women becoming ministers refused to accept 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 as a universal prescription of how we should treat our women. The majority of them were of the opinion that 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 addresses a situation unique to the Corinthian church of the day, and therefore does not apply to us.

In the group of men who opposed the idea of including women in church ministerial positions, the ratio of those who gave an uncritical interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 to those who explained it in other ways was 2:1. It seemed as if, for some, an uncritical interpretation assisted in supporting their – already existing – stand.

### **5.5.3.2 Views from women**



Views from women who supported the idea of including women in church ministerial positions	Views from women who opposed the idea of including women in church ministerial positions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Although 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 states that women who want to ask questions should ask their husbands at home, not all women have husbands.</li> <li>• Paul addressed some particular issue. The context in which 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 was written, was different from ours.</li> <li>• 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 is part of the Bible – we cannot disagree with it. However, women still long to be elders and ministers, like men.</li> <li>• The Jewish and the Corinthian cultures are very different from our own. As one woman put it: “Times have changed”;</li> <li>• Some men are not gifted speakers. So do we still have to insist that such a man be the one to address people, leaving out a woman who is a gifted speaker?</li> <li>• 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 was not a prohibition to preaching.</li> <li>• One woman simply said, “I disagree with 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35”.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 confirms that a woman cannot be a minister. It is important to just obey what this passage says.</li> </ul>

*Figure 12, showing views on 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 of women who were for and against women becoming ministers*

At least in one way or the other, women who want women to be church ministers tried not to accept that 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 should be used as a basis for discriminating against women. The majority of the women regarded the passage as addressing a context different from ours. The others lamented that, as part of God's word, what the text states should be obeyed. Despite this, they still want to lead.

The group of women who were against women as church leaders did not provide explanations of various stands concerning this passage. The majority of them simply said that they agree with the passage.

## **5.6 ANALYSIS OF RESULTS**

### **5.6.1 Introduction**

Since the main focus of this dissertation is finding out to what extent Pauline writings influence people's (men, women, church ministers and lay men) marginalisation of women in the church, in the summarising analysis of the questionnaire results the focus will be on reasons given by men and women who gave a negative response.

Most of the reasons given against the inclusion of women in leadership positions such as deacons, church elders and church ministers are more or less similar. The stiffest opposition has been against the proposal of including women as church ministers, with men giving a stiffer opposition than women. However, all the reasons provided in the three categories – that is, opposition to women becoming deacons, elders and ministers – have been considered. These reasons have been classified into the following categories: Cultural prejudices against women, mostly due to the tradition of the Chewa people; maintaining the conservative stand of the Synod; biblical reasons and practical reasons. It is inevitable that different analysts of these same reasons might come up with slightly different variations of how they are to be classified. This is related to different perceptions people may have concerning each reason, that is, in which category it falls. However, my classification, I trust, is a fairly accurate representation of the research results. Each reason has been classified after thorough consideration.

Views of people on women preaching to fellow women and views of people on 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 and 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 have also been analysed. Views of people on women preaching to men have not been dealt with in the analysis, since the

responses were very similar to responses to other questions. They were therefore left out to avoid duplication.

### **5.6.2 Cultural prejudices against women due to the tradition of the Chewa people**

Having considered the reasons given by men and women against the inclusion of women in leadership positions as deacons, elders and/or ministers, 57.2% of these can be ascribed to cultural prejudice against women. This prejudice is coming mainly from the Chewa tradition. It must be pointed out, however, that this attitude is not unique to the Chewa people. It is worth noting that cultural prejudices pertaining to the supposedly negative anatomy of females have only been mentioned by men. Women did not mention that a pregnant woman cannot discharge her duties as a deacon, elder or minister. Neither did they refer to their monthly cycles as something that may deter them from discharging their leadership duties properly. It would mean, therefore, that it is men who have a problem regarding women in such conditions.

### **5.6.3 Maintaining the conservative stand of the synod**

9.5% of the reasons belong to the category called ‘maintaining the conservative stand of the synod’. Sometimes respondents explicitly stated that including women is against the tradition of the church. In other cases they stated that women have their own responsibilities in the church and that they must stick to these responsibilities. As the percentage shows, this accounted for extremely few reasons. Being custodians of the synod’s tradition is, apparently, not as important to people as being custodians of their traditional culture. This explains why Longwe (2007:71), in her book *Growing up: A Chewa Girl's Initiation*, quotes a few writers and shows that some Christians cling to traditional initiation rites even when the synod (and other churches) have introduced their own initiation rites. Even when the churches branded girls’ traditional initiation rites as heathen, and provided a substitute, people could not easily let go their culture. In a similar manner, when people are called upon to freely express the roots of their belief, traditional culture stands out. According to Chisale (2002:32), through initiation rites

boys and girls are “introduced into the treasures of their tribe and prepared for adult life”. Perhaps it is such fondness of the impartation of traditional values that make them stand out much more than the impartation of the traditions of the synod.

It is worthy noting that the tradition of the Nkhoma Synod would date back to the time the Synod was established by the missionaries. Although at the time the Synod was in the hands of the missionaries, there were no women elders and deacons, it looks like the discrimination of women was not paramount on the missionaries’ agenda. As stated in 3.2.4.2, the Chewa rainmaking cult was stopped not because it was headed by a woman, but because it was considered as erroneous and barbaric and so it had to be replaced with Christianity. It is also noted that in their homeland, the Dutch Reformed Church, who were responsible for the establishment of the Nkhoma Synod, admitted women as deacons in 1982 and as elders and ministers in 1990. If ‘maintaining the conservative stand of the synod’ was the main reason for marginalising the Nkhoma Synod women, the inclusion of women as deacons, elders and ministers in Dutch Reformed Church’s homeland would have influenced the Nkhoma Synod. It is, therefore, not surprising that this section made a very small influence in the stand against women ordination as deacons, elders and ministers.

#### **5.6.4 Biblical reasons**

The reasons based on biblical grounds constituted 21.4% of the reasons given. Only 9.5% of the reasons were related to 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 or 1 Corinthians 11:2–16. The others mentioned the fact that Jesus had male disciples only. Some said that God asked Adam and not Eve to account for the fall. Out of the reasons provided to explain why women should not be included in leadership positions, Pauline teachings on women therefore counted only about 9.5%. The fact that biblical reasons accounted for less than those related to cultural prejudice means that culture is perhaps more deeply embedded in people of the Nkhoma Synod than the Bible. For someone to read the Bible, he/she should have attended school to some level. Before that, reading of the Bible is not possible. In Malawi, the average age for starting school is five years. It may take another

four years before one is able to read. This implies that one is effectively introduced to the Bible at the age of nine. However, by that time a person is already initiated into the traditions of society. As soon as children are able to learn anything, they get introduced to their place in society. Therefore, at a very early age, before they start going to school, children are aware of the status of women and men in society. It becomes second nature to react with some cultural prejudice. Knowledge of the Bible comes afterwards. Perhaps that may in part explain why biblical reasons accounted for 21.4% of the reasons, which is 35.8% less than those related to cultural prejudice.

### **5.6.5 Practical reasons**

Practical reasons are those which focus on the fact that women are often busier than men. Giving them leadership responsibilities would mean overburdening them. This category of reasons accounted for 11.9% of the reasons provided and was subscribed to by both men and women. Men therefore acknowledge the fact that women are the ones who do more of the house chores. Their fulfilling of these duties could be a contributory factor to the negative attitude of men towards women. In some cases the relationship of men to women (husband to wife) sounds more like that of a master to a servant. Hence the suggestion that a woman should be given an opportunity to lead men is not welcome. A woman is looked at as a labourer, and the fruits of that labour man enjoys. In their report titled ‘Malawi Gender Briefing Kit’, the United Nations mention that although women do a lot of work in their respective households, they are forced by “customary practices whereby they are expected to surrender all cash proceeds to their husband who will then decide how to spend the money”. The writer further states that women’s right to use their earnings need to be protected (Nuru 2002:12, 13). The statement that women are busy with house chores therefore has negative connotations in the sense that it attests to the fact that woman is under the authority of man.

### **5.6.6 On people’s views concerning 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 and 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35**

From people's comments on these passages, it is fair to say, as already pointed out, that there is only a very limited influence of 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 and 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 on the marginalisation of women in the Nkhoma Synod. This statement can be substantiated as follows:

The Nkhoma Synod ministers who oppose the inclusion of women in the position of ministers refuse to justify their stand on the ground of 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 and 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35. In their view these passages address a context which is not ours. They therefore refuse to interpret the passages as timeless and universal prescriptions on how to treat women. This means that even without 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 and 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35, the ministers who oppose the inclusion of women in leadership positions are already prejudiced. Those who agree with the passages and who interpret them in a way that can be used to discriminate against women are the laymen who oppose the inclusion of women as church ministers.

Another observation which indicates that 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 and 14:34, 35 have little influence on the marginalisation of women in the Nkhoma Synod is that some lay people, who belong to the group which does not support the inclusion of women in leadership positions, seem unacquainted with the passages. The number of people who failed to comment on their views concerning 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 and 14:34, 35 is indicative of the fact that some of these people did not know these passages. This may indicate that men are prejudiced against women for other reasons and those who use 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 and 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 do so just to rubber stamp an already existing attitude. This seems to correlate with the high percentage of reasons related to culture for stopping women in leadership positions. As indicated in 5.6.2, these account for 57.2% of the reasons given.

If it were not for the fact that the Synod lifted the ban on women preaching to an audience which has men in it, the number of people in agreement with 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 could have been higher. Some of the people have probably chosen to go along with the Synod's decision to allow women to preach to men.

In summary, I want to restate that 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 and 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 currently have very little influence on the marginalisation of women in the Nkhoma Synod. Men's prejudice against women comes mostly from the culture of the Chewa people. According to Phiri (2000:40) a Chewa woman was taught the importance of unconditional submission to her husband, and that the husband should be treated as a king. Gwengwe relates a story of a Chewa woman who tells her daughters that men will always have authority over women (1998:89). The *ankhoswe* situation further shows that women are subservient to men (Phiri 1992:50, 51). Chewa men's view of menstrual blood is another reason for stopping women from occupying leadership positions. And as said in 3.2.4.1 the women occupied the position of Chewa religious leaders not because they were regarded as equal to men, but that wife of God had to be a woman and that there marginal state was instrumental in invoking God's attention. The marginalisation of women is, therefore, already prevalent with or without the two Pauline passages. During the interview, some of the men showed that they were not aware of these passages. It was only when they were asked to comment on the passages that they started relating these passages to their already existing stand of barring women from occupying leadership positions in the church.

### **5.6.7 Conclusion**

From the results, it appears that cultural prejudice against women from the Chewa tradition is the biggest obstacle against including women in church leadership positions. Cultural prejudice makes 57.2%. All the other reasons put together make 42.8%. Of particular interest is that biblical backing, the supposed backbone of the church's views, only makes 21.4.0%. In trying to find out to what extent the Pauline passages in question influence women marginalisation in the Nkhoma Synod, it has been found that the influence is negligible. Pauline passages on women accounted for only 9.5%.

As seen in the results, much greater opposition to the proposal of including women in leadership positions comes from men (figure 1). Amongst the women, those who do not

want to change the Synod's present stand of excluding women from leadership positions come from the rural areas and sometimes with little or even no formal education.

## **5.7 A COMPARISON WITH PHIRI'S FINDINGS**

### **5.7.1 Introduction**

Phiri (1992) published her research findings on the attitude of people in the Nkhoma Synod towards the inclusion of women in leadership seventeen years ago. Since then a number of things have changed. As stated earlier on in this dissertation, the political leadership have pledged and tried to assign women to higher leadership positions. The state president selected a woman as his running mate, who is currently the vice president. In his cabinet of forty-three, eleven are women (Tembo, 2009:5-7). This means that just over 26% of the cabinet are women, while in 1992 Phiri pointed out that since independence, in 1964, there had only been three women as cabinet ministers (Phiri 1992:23). Three female cabinet ministers, for close to thirty years, is a negligible number. There seems to be a shift, although on a minor scale, concerning the attitudes of people towards women. The change in the perspective on women that has appeared in the political area seems to manifest itself, though in a small way, in the Nkhoma Synod as well.

### **5.7.2 Women to be included in leadership**

#### **5.7.2.1 Response from men**

As indicated earlier, out of the twenty men that Phiri interviewed on the idea of including women in leadership positions, eighteen gave a negative response. When Phiri asked people about women in leadership, she was referring to women taking positions as deacons, elders and ministers. I have tried to separate those categories. As pointed out above, the suggestion that women be allowed to be ministers met with the stiffest opposition. 50% of the men interviewed gave a negative response. There is a big



difference between Phiri's 90% and the 50% of this research. The gap is even wider if the average of negative responses with regard to deacons, elders and ministers – 34.7% – is taken into account. During Phiri's time of research, nine in every ten men would not allow women to be leaders. Today only about three and a half men in every ten men would not allow women to be leaders.

Breaking down Phiri's negative responses from men shows that there are some similarities and differences between her results and mine. If negative reasons are put in the ratio cultural prejudice against women to the conservative stand of the Synod to biblical reasons, Phiri's ratio in percentage is 50:22:28. My ratio in percentage is 57.2:9.5:21.4. The similarity is that cultural prejudice is still the largest obstacle in attempting to include women in church leadership positions. Biblical reasons come second in both sets of results. The difference is that there is a swing towards cultural prejudice. Although factors like increased access to media, through which church members see women participating in leadership positions in other churches, for instance female tele-evangelists, and the fact that more women in the secular sphere nowadays occupy higher positions might have influenced the outcome in other categories, cultural prejudice against women seems to have become firmer. In Phiri's results 11% of the negative reasons were ascribed to the Pauline writings, while my results showed that 9.5% used Pauline writings.

#### **5.7.2.2 Response from women**

In Phiri's research 10% of the women interviewed about women becoming leaders gave a negative response. In my research an average of 13% of women interviewed gave a negative response. The stiffest opposition came to the suggestion of women becoming ministers, where 21% of women gave a negative response. The difference between Phiri's 10% and my 13% could be due to the fact that I gave them an option to express their views on each area separately. It might be that the position of minister is revered so much that many of them would not dare to offer it to fellow women. The negative responses of women to women becoming deacons and elders average only 9%.

### **5.7.3 Conclusion**

Although there has been a decline in the percentage of women who support the idea of women becoming leaders, the decline is negligible. However, the number of men who support women's inclusion in leadership positions has increased a great deal. In Phiri's research, one in every ten men supported the idea of including women in leadership positions, while in my findings about six and a half in every ten men support the idea. This may explain why at the synod meeting of October 18 to 23, 2007 it was voted that women may now preach in church even when men are present in the audience. However, the suggestion of including women in leadership positions has not passed yet, although the steps towards it seem steady.

## CHAPTER 6

### What next? A way forward

#### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 1, it has become clear that all the C.C.A.P. Synods in the country marginalise women to some extent. The initial reason for the Livingstonia Synod to include women in deaconate and eldership positions was to fill a leadership vacuum which was created as a result of men going to fight in the First and Second World Wars, and others going outside the country to look for employment. The ordination of women as ministers in the Blantyre and Livingstonia Synods is a very recent development, and women ministers are few. As we have seen, the stand of the Nkhoma Synod against women is even stricter. Up to the time of writing this dissertation women were not allowed to be deacons and elders, let alone ministers. Despite the fact that the need for the equality of men and women is a national and global issue, the Church has up to now remained unmoved.

Chapter 2 shows that the Nkhoma Synod has done commendable work in the Christian, social and economic development of Malawians. Women's contributions to the Nkhoma Synod's achievements are invaluable, unparalleled and in some instances could only be fulfilled by them. Although women have tried to find an alternative way of exercising leadership and uplifting themselves through *Chigwirizano cha Amai*, men have put in place means of dominating women even in their own organisation.

It is interesting to note in chapter 3 that the marginalisation of women is not only a church thing. Although there are slightly more women in Malawi than men, they have not enjoyed a fair share of the resources. There are approximately twice as many illiterate women than men. It is true that there are now more women in high political positions than before. However, the number of women in such positions is still far less than that of men. The elevated position of the female Chewa religious leader was out of necessity and was more of an exception than a rule. In the Chewa matrilineal system women are subjected to the rule of male *Nkhoswes*.

In chapter 4 the discussion of 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 and 14:34, 35 shows that the restrictions on these first century Corinthian women were founded on cultural reasons. The results of the research (chapter 5) show that 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 and 14:34, 35 are only remotely a basis for not allowing women to positions of leadership. The major obstacle in the Nkhoma Synod against including women in leadership is cultural prejudice against women because of tradition.

Naturally, with all the above information in perspective, the question which comes to mind is: What suggestions or recommendations should be made to the Nkhoma Synod and to all who long for inclusion of women in leadership positions in the Nkhoma Synod?

## **6.2 MARGINALISATION OF WOMEN – MORE THAN A CHURCH PRACTICE**

As stated earlier, the marginalisation of women is a national issue. Although the Government of Malawi is striving to include more women in leadership positions, there are still far less women in top positions in the government as well as in top political positions. In section 3.2.4.1 (ii) Phiri (1992:65) is cited as having said that the Chewa chieftainship is passed on to one's sisters' male children. In the absence of male children, female children are chosen. This implies that male heirs are preferred. The present number of female chiefs in the Chewa land is negligible compared to that of men. Sentiments expressed in Gwengwe's book (1989:89) of absolute submission of wives to their husbands also suggest that the woman's place in the Chewa tradition is below that of man. The traditional Chewa practice is more pronounced in the rural areas than in the urban areas because urban areas are governed by rules and regulations which were stipulated by our former colonial masters. Besides, more foreigners reside in towns and that also changes the cultural behaviour of people.

The marginalisation of women is not unique to Chewas or to Malawi. Townshend (2008:6) cites similar problems concerning women. Writing about the plight of women

in general and specifically in Zimbabwe, and using Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*, Townshend explains that women in Zimbabwe are downtrodden and that that is difficult to be questioned and therefore difficult to change because of "the powerful mechanics which create and maintain tradition" (2008:6). She cites Bourdieu's definition of *habitus* as

[S]ystems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organise practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them<sup>51</sup> (Townshend 2008:6)

The *habitus* applies to Malawi as well as far as the status of women is concerned.

As stated above, out of the reasons given for opposing the inclusion of women in church leadership positions, 21.4% were based on the Bible. Pauline passages, a major item in the dissertation, only accounted for 9.5% of the reasons. On the other hand, 57.2% are based on cultural prejudice against women. This is the biggest obstacle against including women in church leadership positions. All the other reasons put together make just less than 42.8%. It therefore seems likely that Paul's teaching is used to merely support already existing views about women.

In the following paragraphs I will look at possible ways of enhancing women's position in public and private offices/engagements and then look at ways of enhancing women's position in traditional set ups before I talk about the church.

### **6.2.1 The position of women in public and private offices/engagements**

By the term public and private offices/engagements I refer to positions occupied by people in the Civil Service, Statutory Co-operations (which are quasi- governmental),

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<sup>51</sup> Townshend quotes Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (trans. R. Nice. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990:53).

para-church organisations and private companies. In this area, a lot is already being done to correct the imbalance. As stated in Chapter 1, the State President of Malawi stated that Malawian women's work is being recognised world-wide. In the same speech he pledged to enhance the positions of women at work by giving them higher positions. He has, for the first time in the history of Malawi, named a woman as his running mate in the presidential elections<sup>52</sup> (Munthali, 2009:1). The Norwegian Embassy has placed advertisements on the local television, campaigning for women to be elected as Members of Parliament. These are just a few examples.

However, these attempts at pulling women up will meet with obstacles. A major obstacle against pulling women up to the same level with men is that there are not enough women with the necessary education to pick up the jobs. As stated earlier, there are twice as many illiterate women than men. This affects the number of women being able to fill important positions. Therefore, a major campaign is needed to educate the girl child. This will take time, but in twenty years or so the imbalance may be alleviated.

In the short term, organisations should give more scholarships to women with some education to enable them to attain the kind of education necessary for managerial posts. This will have an immediate impact on the position of women. It may, in turn, help in putting some pressure on the church to rethink her policy. Since at present men dominate in occupying high positions in jobs, the church may find some justification for her stand of marginalising the women.

### **6.2.2 Women's position in the rural traditional set up**

Probably women in rural traditional set ups suffer more marginalisation than those who stay in urban areas. As stated earlier, the *Makewana* leadership position was an exception and she was placed in that position because that position had to be filled by a woman. To

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<sup>52</sup> She is now vice president, following the results of the elections in which Wamthalika was elected president of Malawi.

help enhance the woman's position in traditional set ups the following suggestions are made:

#### **6.2.2.1 Civic education**

There is a need for organising forums where village people are introduced to the idea of treating women as equal to men. This kind of civic education should be provided to both men and women, since women sometimes refuse to take up opportunities presented to them. They often regard it as normal to be led by men in all places and at all times. Indirect rewards should be given to men who allow women to take part in decision making. Chiefs should be encouraged to judge the suitability of an heir to the throne on one's character and not on one's gender.

All this, however, should be done carefully without creating a confrontation between men and women. Both men and women should be made to understand and feel that each group is important to the other and that each plays a complementary role to the other. Such a move will obviously meet with some resistance, but eventually it may result in a shift towards equality between men and women.

#### **6.2.2.2 Equal treatment**

Although women more frequently become victims of physical abuse and of property grabbing in times of a deceased spouse, it is important that men and women as victims receive equal assistance from the government and men and women as perpetrators receive equal punishment from the judiciary. This will underscore that the desired end is equality between men and women, and not a bias towards women, which may make men resentful.

### **6.2.2.3 Women role models to village girls**

Girls in the rural areas do not have women to whom they can look up as role models. Women who have excelled in life and have high positions in the civil service, politics and private companies live in towns and cities. Efforts should be made by the appropriate government ministries to provide forums where prominent women can address and encourage the rural girl child. Girls should be made to see that a woman can be in charge of women as well as men. This may not only help the girl child to aim higher, but make her realise that women have a role to play in leadership.

### **6.2.2.4 Educate the girl child**

The girl child should be given proper education. The girl child is more vulnerable to sexual abuse and as Townshend (2008:76) puts it, she is withdrawn first in times of economic hardship when parents cannot afford to pay school fees for all the children. This makes the girl child drop out of school more readily than the boy child. With no education, she will be stuck at the bottom of the hierarchical ladder. Care must, therefore, be taken to support the girl child to continue with her education despite hindrances. The government should make an effort to give scholarships to girls whose parents are not able to pay school fees for them. Girls who have become pregnant should be encouraged to get back to school as soon as possible. They should not be stigmatised any more than the boy/man who made them pregnant. UNICEF, in their magazine "The Girl Child in Malawi – a Case for Action" (p 30)<sup>53</sup>, make another important point. They state that the Government should provide "alternative types of education for working girls and girl drop-outs who cannot fit into the regular school system".

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<sup>53</sup> No date indicated, but it first came into circulation around 1997



### **6.3 THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH**

As indicated above, in the research conducted very few people mentioned 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 as a reason for stopping women to preach to men. The responses to the questions which asked the interviewees to comment on 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 and 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 suggest that there are a few who want to use the passages as a basis for discriminating against women. Though only by a few, a case was made against women leadership on the ground of the Pauline writings; and it should not be ignored. While the church ministers, both those opposing and those supporting the proposal of including women in leadership positions, made very well informed comments about 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 and 14:34, 35, some church members gave a literal/uncritical interpretation of the passages. Others had no idea of these texts. It appeared as if they were seeing them for the first time, and therefore gave irrelevant comments.

In her dissertation, Phiri laments that the Nkhoma Synod has used some biblical texts which seem to perpetuate patriarchy. According to her the Nkhoma Synod has deliberately not regarded critical interpretations of these texts (Phiri 1992: 275,276). However, in the researcher's view a more accurate assessment of the situation would be that the ministers and some of the laymen do interpret the passages critically. Though knowledgeable on critical interpretation of the passages, some are just prejudiced against women, and therefore choose to use an uncritical interpretation to authenticate their stand on women by Scripture. The real obstacle is prejudice against women. However, something still needs to be said concerning their use of Paul's prescriptions.

#### **6.3.1 Different interpretations of 1 Corinthians 11:2 – 16; I Corinthians 14:34, 35**

In section 4.3, many different interpretations of 1 Corinthians 11:2– 16 and 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 have been discussed. Many of them are well argued and each of them presents a case that cannot easily be ignored. Therefore, presenting a particular viewpoint as the only interpretation, would, in the researcher's view not only be manipulative of the situation, but would also be problematic. Even the former general secretary of the

Nkhoma Synod, Kawale, like other ministers of the Nkhoma Synod, object to a universal barring of women from leadership and the pulpit on the ground of 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 (cf 1.2.2). Although the researcher agrees with Kawale that 1 Corinthians 14 addressed a specific and isolated context, the sentiments expressed in the text are consistent with the entire first century world. The passage should, in the researcher's view, not be taken as general principles or generic and timeless rules, not only on the ground that 1 Corinthians 14 addressed a specific and isolated context, but because it addressed a different world altogether. The important point to derive from this is that it serves as an example of the multiple interpretations of the passage.

### **6.3.2 Paul commended some women who were in leadership positions**

Those who stick to an uncritical interpretation of I Corinthians 14:34, 35, and regard this as a timeless prohibition, should also consider other passages where Paul deals with women in leadership positions. Among the people Paul commends, two women stand out. These are Phoebe and Priscilla.

#### **6.3.2.1 Phoebe**

Paul uses the term “deacon” to describe Phoebe. According to some biblical interpreters the use of this term is important in establishing Paul's views on women, since he uses the same term for male office holders (MacDonald 1999:208). By referring to Phoebe as a deacon, Paul describes her equality with the brotherhood (Guthrie 1970:1045). Citing Schüssler Fiorenza, it is said that although the meaning of the term “deacon” is not clear, Paul usually used it when the preaching of the Gospel is central. He commends Phoebe as an official teacher and missionary of the church at Cenchreae (MacDonald 1999:209).

#### **6.3.2.2 Priscilla**

Another woman commended by Paul is Priscilla. Of particular interest is the fact that her name, Priscilla, is mentioned first, before that of a man, Aquila. MacDonald thinks this

means that Priscilla was a woman of higher status (1999:241). In a patriarchal society that must be very significant. If we judge all women by the standard stipulated in 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35, we should do the same for women such as Priscilla.

### **6.3.3 Biblical description of God in feminine imagery**

As was pointed out in chapter 5, some of the men in the Nkhoma Synod resent the idea of women in leadership positions because of their perception of women's bodies. They attach some taboos to menstruating women (see sections 5.3.1; 5.3.3; 5.3.5), and there is something they do not like about pregnant women (see sections 5.3.3; 5.3.5). Phiri also mentions that some men would not allow women into leadership positions because of the nature of a woman's body (1992:50). However, it should be noted that in the Bible God is sometimes described by means of feminine traits. Kawale describes these as follows:

There are traditionally female traits that are metaphorically attributed or ascribed to God. For example, in some texts the divine name, Yahweh, is described in female anatomical forms (Efthimiades 1999:38, 49). Yahweh is depicted as a "Midwife" who gave birth to the psalmist (Ps 22:9; 71:6) and as a "Mother" who nurtured or raised the psalmist (Pss (sic) 131; 139). In Isaiah 66:13 Yahweh is portrayed as a "Mother" who comforts her children. Yahweh is described as a Mother who will never forget Her Children (Is 49:15). Yahweh is also depicted as a "Mother-hen" who protects the chickens from danger and comforts them (Ps 17:3; 36:7; 7:16; 3:7; 91:4; Mt 23:37; Lk 13:34) (Kawale 2001:227, 228).

If we have been brought up in a culture where female bodies are regarded as unsuited to be associated with God, and if indeed we have used some passages in the Bible to marginalise women, there are other passages in the same Bible, as shown above, in which God is referred to by using female attributes. We cannot just capitalise on the passages which subscribe to the marginalisation of women.

### **6.3.4 Explanations of 'head', 'head covering' and 'women to be silent' as referring to specific situations**

As stated earlier, in 1.2.2, most of the Nkhoma Synod ministers are in very good academic standing. Most of them have, at least, the first degree. They make academically sound interpretations of 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 and 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35. Nearly all of those I have interviewed, both those who are in favour of accepting women in leadership positions and those who are opposed to it, are of the opinion that 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 and 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 are addressed to a specific context – they did not address issues which transcend time and culture. Perhaps this is an indication that those who use these passages to stop women getting into leadership positions use it only because they know that the people they are addressing do not know that. Why can't the church ministers educate church members about the truth concerning these Pauline passages on women? It seems as if the passage is knowingly wrongly used to condone a wish to keep on ruling women.

### **6.3.5 Cultural prejudices because of tradition**

In 5.6.2 I have stated that cultural prejudice from tradition is the biggest reason for barring women from the position of church minister. 57.2% of those who did not want women to be ministers based their stand on cultural prejudice. However, basing our marginalising of women on the ground of cultural prejudice is not only narrow minded but also cruel. There was a time when slavery was seen as acceptable, at least by slave owners. Nowadays we look back at slavery with shame. If we sort out our cultural prejudice now, we may save ourselves from a similar shame in future, or at least reduce the impact of that shame.

It is also important to note that 79% of the women interviewed voted “yes” to the proposal of women becoming ministers. 90% of the women interviewed wanted women to be elders. This is an indication that women themselves are longing for leadership positions. This should make us realise that we put women in lower positions against their wish.

The church and church leaders have been an instrument of social change. For example, Martin Luther King Jr., a Baptist Minister, led the struggle against racial segregation in America (Jenkins 2002:119). In Malawi, under the Banda regime, at a time when, as Ross (1996:23) puts it, "...the system of political control was so complete that, for most people, it was difficult even to imagine anything different", it took the Roman Catholic Church, through the bishops, to write a pastoral letter which helped to bring the much needed political change. The Nkhoma Synod has, on several occasions, issued pastoral letters directing its people on social, political and economic matters. In all these endeavours, the church has tried to break a standing culture and has brought some change in people's mindset. The Nkhoma Synod would do well to address such cultural prejudices and biases which put women on the receiving end of social injustices.

The fact that 21% of the women interviewed did not support the idea of women becoming ministers and that 10% of the women interviewed did not support that of women becoming elders shows the need for the church to encourage women to take up leadership positions. Proper programmes should be set up in the Nkhoma Synod to educate men and women on the practicality and necessity of men and women working together as leaders. In the past, men have been asked to decide whether or not to allow women to be elders (Phiri 1992:207). This exercise was wrong in two respects. The first was that only men were given the mandate to decide. They represented men's interests and not those of women. The second problem was that some people without proper education were consulted with regard to the advantages and disadvantages of including or excluding women in leadership positions. The people who are to decide on such an important matter are supposed to be well informed on the topic, giving them precedents of women in high leadership positions. Women should also be included in making decisions on matters which concern them so directly.

At this stage something very important needs to be said. The Synod passed a resolution that women can now preach to an audience where men are present. It has been followed. As I said in chapter 5, the outcome to the question inquiring about people's views on 1 Corinthians 14:34,35, has been positively affected by that resolution. In a similar

manner, if the Synod would take a leading role to include women in leadership positions, the obstacles which prevailed till now will simply disappear. We have seen it happen with women preaching to men. It can happen with the suggestion of including women in leadership positions. The Synod has helped in the transformation of culture as discussed earlier in the dissertation. It should help with this one too.

## 6.4 CONCLUSION

In addressing the questions asked in chapter 1,

What is the cause of this marginalisation of women in the Nkhoma Synod? Is this related to Paul's prescriptions to women in his writings? Did Paul's views on and prescriptions to women change the situation of women or did they just cohere with existing views about women? Are Paul's writings used to support/uphold what Townshend (2008:5) refers to as *habitus*?

it has been shown that the major cause of the marginalisation of women in the Nkhoma Synod is cultural prejudice. Paul's writings on women are used minimally only to substantiate cultural prejudice against women. The literal/uncritical interpretations of 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 and 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 by the common members of the church have only served to substantiate an already existing attitude towards women. *Makewana's* case is not representative of the position of women in general in the Chewa tradition. She was in that position for the purpose of fulfilling a specific role that only a woman could fulfil. Moreover, this was an exception rather than a rule. In some cases the Chewa culture means well to place the woman under the protection of a male adult relative called *ankhoswe*. However, this has had some negative effect on the promotion of equality between men and women. The women have been culturally conditioned to subject themselves to the leadership of men. Traditional men too have been taught that women are supposed to be at the bottom of the hierarchical ladder. As pointed out above, to address the inequalities the girl child should be targeted, but at the same time women who have some education should be supported and be offered scholarships. At a time when women are encouraged to take up leadership positions in the secular world, the

church should reassess their stand regarding women and should not only allow women in leadership positions, but also encourage them to take up those positions.

It was mentioned in 1.7 that the researcher is male and a member and church elder of the C.C.A.P. Nkhoma Synod, and therefore an insider, pointing fingers to himself and his church. We need to revisit our policy concerning women and let them into leadership positions. Government and other institutions are moving towards treating women as equals – and they are moving very fast. We cannot afford to stick to our tradition of marginalising women since we are not an island.

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### **MINUTES OF CHURCH MEETINGS**

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Meeting of Bungwe Lotsogolera of 3 May 2005, Minute M. 6357.

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### **INTERVIEW**

Personal interview with Rev D. Chifungo, General Secretary: Nkhoma Synod on 22 October 2008.

**APPENDIX – Research questionnaire**

1. Name of Church: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Are you male or female? (Tick ✓)

<b>Female</b>

3. Your Age? 

<b>Male</b>

3. Status of membership? (Tick ✓)

<b>Class</b>	<b>Full Member</b>	<b>Deacon</b>	<b>Church Elder</b>	<b>Reverend</b>

4. How long have you been a member of the CCAP? \_\_\_\_\_ years

5. Educational Attainment? (Tick ✓)

Primary School		Secondary School		Post Secondary Colleges				Other Colleges
Std 5	Std 8	JC	MSCE	University				
				Dip	Bach.	Masters	PhD	

6. **Women in Leadership Positions**

a) What is your view of women becoming deacons (Atumiki)? (Tick ✓)

<b>No</b>

<b>Yes</b>

If “Yes”, why would you allow women to become deacons? (Tick ✓)

<b>Biblical Reasons</b>	<b>Cultural Reasons</b>	<b>Both Biblical &amp; Cultural Reasons</b>

State your reasons below:

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If “No”, why would you NOT allow women to become deacons? (Tick ✓)

<b>Biblical Reasons</b>	<b>Cultural Reasons</b>	<b>Both Biblical &amp; Cultural Reasons</b>

State your reasons below:

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b) What is your view of women becoming church elders (Akuluampingo)?

<b>No</b>

<b>Yes</b>

If “Yes”, why would you allow women to become church elders? (Tick ✓)

<b>Biblical Reasons</b>	<b>Cultural Reasons</b>	<b>Both Biblical &amp; Cultural Reasons</b>

State your reasons below:

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If “No”, why would you NOT allow women to become church elders? (Tick ✓)

<b>Biblical Reasons</b>	<b>Cultural Reasons</b>	<b>Both Biblical &amp; Cultural Reasons</b>

State your reasons below:

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c) What is your view of women becoming church ministers (Reverends)?



<b>No</b>

<b>Yes</b>

If “Yes”, why would you allow women to become church ministers (Reverends)? (Tick ✓)

<b>Biblical Reasons</b>	<b>Cultural Reasons</b>	<b>Both Biblical &amp; Cultural Reasons</b>

State your reasons below:

---



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If “No”, why would you NOT allow women to become Reverends? (Tick ✓)

<b>Biblical Reasons</b>	<b>Cultural Reasons</b>	<b>Both Biblical &amp; Cultural Reasons</b>

State your reasons below:

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7. What is your opinion concerning women preaching to fellow women? \_\_\_\_\_

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8. What is your opinion concerning women preaching to men?

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9. Is there anything which should be done for women which is not being done now? \_

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10\*. What is your view of 1 Corinthians 11:2 – 16? \_\_\_\_\_

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11\*. What is your view of 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35? \_\_\_\_\_

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12. Any other recommendations? \_\_\_\_\_

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- Thank you -

\*Questions 10 & 11 were used only in the aural interview, after the person had already given his/her honest opinion concerning women participation in leadership positions and preaching.